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**LIVING  
"WITH  
THE  
SEVEN  
WORDS**

**DAILY DEVOTIONS FOR LENT**

**John Alexander McElroy**  
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LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

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**To GRACE**

## PREFACE

THESE DAILY DEVOTIONS COME FROM AN EXPERIENCE. FOR ten years it was my privilege to serve as pastor at Arch Street, Methodism's center-city church in Philadelphia. Each Lent, Arch Street conducts daily noontime services presenting distinguished guest preachers. And each Good Friday it was my part as pastor to preach the seven words of Jesus from the cross.

The experience of living with the seven words is what this book seeks to share. These pages are written from all that has happened when, suddenly, a word from the cross would overtake and find me and "speak to my condition."

The words of Christ always have power to come alive. And these words from his cross are a sort of devotional creed. Each word is an outpouring from Jesus' inner self. They speak with a simplicity and directness we cannot evade. There are no depths or secret places where his words cannot go. Like Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven" they pursue us until they find us. When they find us, we discover that his cross is indeed "love's uplifted stroke"!

My prayer is that God will use these meditations to kindle in others the experience of living with the seven words.

JOHN ALEXANDER McELROY



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### *The Seven Words of Jesus from the Cross*

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

LUKE 23:34

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

LUKE 23:43

*"Woman, behold thy son! . . . Behold thy mother!"*

JOHN 19:26-27

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

MARK 15:34

*"I thirst."*

JOHN 19:28

*"It is finished."*

JOHN 19:30

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

LUKE 23:46

# FIRST WEEK

■ This first week, beginning with Ash Wednesday, let us live with the seven words in the light of the Lord's Prayer. In a profound sense what Jesus taught us to pray he himself exemplified on the cross. Jesus lived the Lord's Prayer. And he lived it most triumphantly those three hours of darkness when he hung between earth and sky.

## THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ACTION

Most of us pray the Lord's Prayer every day. Do we realize that the cross is the Lord's Prayer in action? In each sentence of the prayer there is a persistent echo. We hear the one same voice of Jesus. But do the words seem different? Listen. In the stillness of devotion you will discover that the seven words are really the Lord's Prayer spoken from a different place.

The place is called Calvary.

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### THE FIRST WORD

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

Our Father  
Which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us . . .

Stop!

Once, on a Good Friday, just at this place in the Lord's Prayer, in a voice such as you might cry "Fire!" the preacher called out to the congregation, "Stop!"

"What about this word of Jesus from the cross?" he asked.

## LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

Do you see the contrast? The Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, forgive us." And the cross: "Father, forgive them." Contrast? No. This is the echo that comes to your heart. The cross echoes the Lord's Prayer. Or rather, the cross is the Lord's Prayer in action.

In the solemnity of a Good Friday service was it wrong for the preacher to cry "Stop"? If so, may God forgive. The only purpose was to somehow fix this faith: the cross and the Lord's Prayer belong together! During these beginning days of Lent the Lord's Prayer can be your way of living with the seven words. Each day as you pray, listen! Listen to hear what Jesus says from the cross that echoes what he taught in the prayer.

Every year, in every church, Lent climaxes in the same seven words. Always the same! Never any change. Why not? Because from one year to the next *we change*. We are not the same people we were a year ago. Since last Good Friday, one way or another, for good or for bad, every one of us is different. We have changed. That is why, now, we are ready to receive something new from the seven words we could not have grasped before.

Do you pray the Lord's Prayer every day? These days of Lent what possible reason could you give for not praying?

"But wait," you say, "I do pray the Lord's Prayer!"

Do you? You know, of course, there is a difference between saying the words and praying the prayer. The cross is the difference. Jesus taught us to say the Lord's Prayer. But on the cross he showed us what it means to pray it.

Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up will . . . draw all men unto me." (John 12:32.) And when Jesus was crucified there was one terrible moment when he was finally "lifted up." One excruciating instant when, suddenly, his whole body hung by his nailed hands. The latin word for cross is *crux*. It is the cross (*crux*) that gives us our word *excruciating*. It is this excruciating instant when Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them."

Now then. Do you pray the Lord's Prayer every day? Do you? Most of us only say the words. And yet, perhaps all God asks is for

## THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ACTION

us to say the words thoughtfully! If only we say them aright, then the saying will prepare us for the praying. Do you see it now? The Lord's Prayer is how God prepares us for that one excruciating instant when we must live Jesus' word from the cross. Who of us knows when the prayer we say must suddenly become the prayer we live? Who knows when "Our Father, forgive us" must suddenly become "Father, forgive them"?

Consider Stephen's excruciating instant! They beat Stephen's life out with stones. It was a terrible way to die. All around Stephen, in a circle, the men closed in. Can you see the look on their faces? The stones in their hands? But listen. At that instant Stephen is calling.

Calling?

"And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." (Acts 7:59, 60.)

"Our Father, forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive . . ."

"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

Stephen would understand that the Lord's Prayer is the cross of Christ in action. Stephen would understand. May God help us all to understand. The cross? The Lord's Prayer? There is an instant when they are one and the same. It is this instant when Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

### *Scripture for Meditation*

Acts 7:54-60: "Calling upon God."

## THE SECOND WORD

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

When I was a child and had nothing to pay  
They fed me and clothed me, day upon day,

## LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

She nursed me in measles and other such ills  
And mended my clothes, and he paid the bills.  
They hoped for me, feared for me, prayed for me too  
And saved me from evil and carried me through  
And I never knew how, and I never asked why  
They should wear out their lives for a thing such as I.

Well, that was their way.  
I was a child and had nothing to pay.

Those days are far gone: I grew to a man  
A respectable person according to plan  
Took sixteen in collars and wore a black coat  
Political candidates called for my vote.  
I wrote to the papers and gave them my views  
And preached to the people all patient in pews  
I was paid once a month and had an account  
At the bank, with a checkbook to show the amount.

Was it worth all God's trouble?

So much of my life is wood, hay, stubble  
So little is good that could meet His desire  
So much of me bad, only fit for the fire.  
If God calls for a reckoning, Ah! What shall I say?  
"Lord, this poor sinner has nothing to pay."

"Nothing to pay! Give him justice," they say.  
"Nothing for nothing! Take him away!"

But God says, "Stay,  
Christ is for those who have nothing to pay."

Well, that is God's way.  
Christ is for those who have nothing to pay.<sup>1</sup>

Now. This second word from the cross in a single sentence: The dying thief is the supreme example of those who have "nothing to

<sup>1</sup> Walter Russell Maltby, "A Song of the Manse," *Obiter Scripta* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), p. 153. Used by permission.

pay." And yet Jesus said to him, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Every day we pray, "Our Father, thy kingdom come." But what right have we to be in God's kingdom? Morally and spiritually we are like the thief. We have no more "right" to the kingdom than he. We are paupers with nothing to pay:

"Give him justice," they say.

Justice? That is what put the thief on the cross; justice. He even admits it himself. "We receive the due reward of our deeds," he says. (Luke 23:41.) Justice! If all we get from God is justice, who shall stand?

The dying thief is the supreme example of those who have nothing to pay. He dared not pray for justice. He prayed for mercy: "Lord, remember me." Mercy! And we are like him. He deserved justice and judgment. But from the lips of Jesus he received pardon: "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Now. Let us ask ourselves. When we pray the Lord's Prayer do we pray for *justice* or *mercy*? "Our Father, thy kingdom come." In all justice have we any right to pray for God's kingdom? In all justice do we deserve any part, any place, in it? No more than the dying thief! And what "right" did he have? *Only the cross.*

No one truly understands the Lord's Prayer until he brings it to the cross and prays it there. The Lord's Prayer does not really come to life until it comes to the cross. And always, it is Jesus triumphant on his cross when the Lord's Prayer comes to life. The cross is the Lord's Prayer in action.

"Our Father, thy kingdom come." Is the kingdom something we do for God? Something we build with our hands and hearts? No! The kingdom is what God does with us. *With* us! Does that make Jesus' second word come home: "Today shalt thou be *with* me"? It is only *with* Christ on his cross that God takes us into his kingdom. Not justice. This is the "mercy" of God!

Ultimately there is no other way to pray the Lord's Prayer than to pray as the thief prayed to Jesus: "when thou comest into thy kingdom." (Or, as we pray it: "Thy kingdom come.") And from

the cross Jesus says to us what he said to the thief, "Today shalt thou be with me." And we are. He is with us and we are with him, today and every day. This is what it means to "live" with the Seven Words! It means the mercy of God. It means Christ on his cross taking us *with* him into the kingdom.

"Our Father, thy kingdom come."

*Scripture for Meditation*

Isa. 43:2; Matt. 28:16-20: "Lo, I am with you alway."

## THE THIRD WORD

*"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"*

In his own hand, W. E. Sangster sends a letter of greeting to Arch Street Church in Philadelphia. He says his congregation in London thinks of Arch Street with special affection. "And," says Sangster, "we turn our thoughts into prayers."

We Christians treasure the Lord's Prayer. Why? Because its words are Jesus' thoughts turned into prayer. More than that. Jesus took the words of his prayer and turned them into deeds. For example, in this third word from the cross Jesus *does* for his mother what he teaches when we pray, "Our Father, hallowed be thy name."

Scripture says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this. To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep (one's self) unspotted from the world." (James 1:27.) In this third word, Jesus looking down from the cross sees his widowed mother. And we see this act of pure religion. Jesus commends his mother to the care of John. And Jesus commends John to the care of his mother. Here is religion that honors God! "Our Father, hallowed (honored) be thy name."

As Jesus did for his mother, so are we to do for others. Pure reli-



## THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ACTION

gion before God *is* to do for others in their affliction. We honor God's name by what we practice, not merely by what we profess. In everything he did Jesus hallowed the name of God. And on the cross Jesus made it plain that we hallow God's name when we do for others as he did for Mary.

At the Metropolitan Museum, in the permanent collection, there is a modernistic painting by Salvadore Dali "The Crucifixion." It is startling. It shows a massive cross, as of great stone blocks. And then, with his face turned away, with his arms outstretched; the luminous figure of Christ. The Christ hangs in mid-air, unsupported. Away from the cross. The Christ hangs free. Then, down on the ground, looking up in lonely adoration, a single figure. It is Mary. She stands in the shadows, a robe at her shoulders, the long folds at her feet. All you see is the profile of her upturned face. And Jesus has his face turned away!

That painting is this third word. Jesus with his face turned away! For now he has given his mother to the care of another. But *why* is there no one else in the picture? *Why* only Jesus on his cross and Mary? Is it because whenever we look at the cross that is what we must always see? Jesus and one other? At this moment, the third word, it is Jesus and Mary. A little ago it was Jesus and the dying thief. But always, whenever we look at the cross, there is some one other person. Jesus and one other!

In his painting, Dali seems to suggest that it is not the cross when we see Jesus alone. It is not the cross when we see Jesus and the crowd. The true cross is when we see Jesus and some one other person. Jesus and someone hungry, perhaps. Or someone athirst. Jesus and a stranger. Or someone naked, or sick, or in prison. At this third word it was Jesus and Mary. And, in the painting, on the cross Jesus has his face turned away. Why? Because it is that other person we are to see! "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren." (Matt. 25:40.) Unto *one*!

"Hallowed be thy name." How do we hallow God's name? It is when we remember someone else as Jesus on the cross remembered Mary. Pure religion before God the Father is to remember others

in their affliction: fatherless, widow, hungry, stranger, sick! Jesus says they are all his brethren *and ours*.

"Thoughts turned into prayers," says Dr. Sangster. But we have something more precious than any letter. We have the Lord's Prayer spoken by Jesus himself. More than that! In the pure religion of Christ's cross we have his prayer turned into deeds. We have the Lord's Prayer in action. And for us, day by day, to live with this third word from the cross means to do for one another as Jesus did for his mother.

### *Scripture for Meditation*

Matt. 25:34-46: "Unto one of the least."

## THE <sup>1</sup>FOURTH WORD 4

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

In a certain city, on a Good Friday afternoon, three students stood and watched the crowds go in and out at a great cathedral. Their story is vouched for by a French bishop.

"How can people be so superstitious as to believe this business about Christ dying for their sins?" the students said. And as they talked, two of them turned to the one who was bolder: "Are you afraid to go in and tell the priest what we've been saying? We dare you!" So the student went with his friends into the cathedral and found the priest:

"I have come," he said, "to tell you that Christianity is dead. I think religion is superstition."

(Every pastor knows people who say the same thing.)

The priest looked at the young man: "Why did you come to tell me this?"

## THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ACTION

The student rather brazenly explained, "My two friends dared me."

The priest looked into the faces of the other two: "All right," he said, "you took a dare from them; take one from me. Go out into the cathedral. At the altar there is a big wooden cross with a figure of Christ. I want you to walk up to the chancel, look up at the cross and say to yourself, "Jesus Christ died for me and I don't give a damn."

The young man dropped his eyes, but the priest insisted. His friends were there and he had to save face. He had not expected this. It was with great reluctance that he went and stood at the altar. But, defiantly, he came back. "I have done it," he said.

"Do it once more," said the priest, "after all it means nothing to you."

The French bishop says that the second time the words stammered on the lips of the student. "Jesus Christ died for me and I don't give . . . a . . ." This time the young man did not go back to the priest. He started for the door. But the priest was there before him, turned him around. "Do it once more," he said, "then you can go." They watched him, the two students and the priest. People were coming and going. No one else paid any attention to the young man standing. He stood there a long time. Suddenly he dropped to his knees, bowed his head, and clenched his hands in prayer.

Now then, whenever the bishop tells this story he always says this, "I was that young man."

Jesus Christ died for me and I don't give a damn! Can you *label that*? It is the temptation not to care. It is, perhaps, our greatest temptation: to stand at the very cross of Christ and still not care! "Jesus Christ died for me and I don't. . ." Do the words tremble even as you read them? Most of us would never say it. But how does it look, the lives we live? Jesus Christ died for us. And does it look as if we care?

Does Christ know anything about this temptation not to care? Listen. There is an echo from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast

thou forsaken me?" Is Jesus tempted to believe God does not care? Tempted? "Our Father, lead us not into temptation." Do you really believe that the cross is the Lord's Prayer in action? Do you really believe that on the cross Jesus faced and defeated the temptation to wonder whether God cares?

All of us sense that in some way this fourth word belongs to Christ alone. It is his mystery beyond our knowing. Nothing in us can ever be quite like that moment when Christ cried out as if his soul were cut off from God. But yet! Has it ever come home to you that the temptation not to care, and the temptation to wonder whether God cares always go together?

What does a man mean when he says, "I don't care about God"? He means: "I don't believe God cares about me." I don't believe God cares! And then, in a sort of defiance and rebellion, the human heart hardens. So what! If God doesn't care, neither do I!

The temptation not to care and the temptation to believe God does not care always go together. And in the same way, the Lord's Prayer and the Cross of Christ go together. "Our Father, lead us not into temptation." May God deliver us from the temptation it is to not care! Jesus Christ died for us. And by the lives that we live does it look as if we care?

Kneel down in your devotions. Listen to this deeply troubled cry of Christ. Does God care? Ah, this is what it means to live with the cross! The cross is where Jesus faced and defeated this greatest temptation of all. The cross is where Jesus declares God does care. The cross is where Jesus tested and proved that, no matter what our temptation, God will lead us and deliver us from evil.

And prayer is how God delivers.

"Our Father, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

### *Scripture for Meditation*

I Cor. 10:1-13: "A way to escape."

## THE FIFTH WORD

*"I thirst."*

In a military court a Marine Corps officer was standing trial. He had been shot down in enemy territory over Korea and had been taken prisoner by the Chinese Reds. They kept him in a cave in mid-winter. It was cold. Water, spilling from his tea, froze on touching the ground. "I never stopped shivering," the officer said.

For long periods of time he was not allowed to relieve himself at a latrine. Once, he did so in his drinking cup. The sickening contents froze. For two days he chipped away to make the cup usable again. Finally, he was allowed some hot water which melted the rest.

He drank the contents.

This is printed testimony from a military court. The officer's exact words are, "It did not taste so good, but I was thirsty."

*Thirsty!* Does the story offend you? Is it a breach of good taste to suggest the nauseating extremity of what thirst can be? God forgive! There is no desire to be ill-mannered. But somehow, every believer in Christ needs to understand that the cross is a revolting cup of offense. At Gethsemane, the night before the cross, Jesus shuddered at its very thought. "O my Father," he prayed, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." (Matt. 26:39.) This "cup." The cross is a revolting cup of offense.

The Marine Corps officer—does he ever go to church on Good Friday? And does this fifth word from the cross, "I thirst," nauseate him with remembering? It is the only thing Jesus says about his suffering. Most of us will not understand. How can we? But that Marine Corps officer will understand!

In the days of his Korea thirst did the officer pray the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father"? Ask yourself. Is there any place in the Lord's Prayer for a man to cry out the physical agony of thirst? Do *physical* things mean anything to God? What good does it do to pray about

weakness, pain, hunger, and thirst? And for an answer the Lord's Prayer teaches that God cares about hunger: "Give us this day our daily bread." And the cross of Christ teaches that God can understand the sheer physical agony of thirst. The Lord's Prayer and the cross speak together! This is what they say: *weakness, pain, hunger, and thirst. God knows about such things and God cares!*

Bread for hunger. A cup of water for thirst. These are the simplest and most basic of physical necessities. And Jesus offered them up to God: one in the Lord's Prayer, the other on the cross. Does God indeed know about the daily needs of our physical life and the desperate needs of our physical body? Let it be eternally answered, Yes! Because Jesus hung upon a cross, and because he taught us to pray, we deeply believe God knows and cares.

"I thirst." Sometimes we Christians set up a false dignity about the cross. May God forgive us. We even make the cross into an ornament, a piece of costume jewelry. We forget it is actually a naked, shameful embarrassment. The cross is a revolting "cup" of offense.

Did the disciples, in the sometimes of sleep, ever see again the twisted face of Jesus on the cross? The flies fastening on his blood-soaked wounds? Were they ever able to put out of their ears the dreadful cry: "I thirst"? How could they ever forget! Neither does God. God never forgets. He remembers every hungry child and every sufferer with parched lips and thick tongue. God hears the constant prayer: "Our Father, daily bread!" God knows the tortured cry: "I thirst!" This is what the Lord's Prayer and the cross really mean.

All this we believe because Jesus hung upon a cross. Because he taught us to pray. The Lord's Prayer and the cross go together. They go up to the very ears of God. He hears. And knows. And cares.

### *Scripture for Meditation*

Matt. 10:38-42: "A cup of cold water."

## THE SIXTH WORD

*"It is finished."*

Some people think prayer is when you say something. No, prayer is when you do something. "More things are wrought by prayer," says Tennyson (i.e., more things are *done* by prayer), "than this world dreams of." Prayer is when you do something.

Is there anything prayer cannot do? Jesus said, "If ye have faith . . . ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be *done*." (Matt. 21:21.) And yet! On all the surface of the earth what mountain has ever been so moved? The Himalayas? Nonsense. You might personally wish them some place else. You might even pray for them to be there. But deep in your heart you know the Himalayas are right where God put them. Is "faith" a question of impossibles? No. Faith is a question of what, deep in your heart, you know is right with God. But when something is right with God then, as Jesus says it, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God!" (Luke 18:27.)

When a world is perishing in sin is it *right with God* for that world to be saved? Deep in our hearts we say it is right. But we also say it is impossible for us to do. For us, sin is more formidable than the Himalayas. There are many instances where faith says a thing is right. And yet, for us, it is impossible. This was supremely demonstrated by Jesus. Is it possible for a man to die on a cross and save the world? Possible for a man? No. With *men* it is impossible. But with *God* it has already been done. One great triumphant cry upon the cross: "Finished!" It is done. "Impossible!" you say? How can a man die on a cross and save the world? How?

The prayer of Jesus' faith!

All his life Jesus prayed. "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed." (Mark 1:35.) Again, "and it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12.) Have you ever fallen

on your face before God? Have your hands been so tightly clenched that the fingers went white with the intensity of your prayer? Have the cords of your neck stood out with the strain? Has the shaking and the sweat begun to come? Listen. When Jesus was in the garden that night before the cross the scripture says, "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

All his life Jesus prayed. Such prayer as the world has never known before or since. Yet even with such prayer as his, how can Jesus die upon a cross and save the world? "Impossible!" you say. Yes, with men. But not with God. All things are possible *with* God. Some people think prayer is when you say something. No, prayer is when you do something with God's help. Or better still, prayer is how you do it.

In the deepest sense, what Jesus did upon the cross *was* prayer. The cross was Jesus in action. And when Jesus cried, "Finished!" he declared that what prayer can do has now been done. *It is finished.*

Once more, let us go back to the gospel record. "And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father. . . ." (Luke 11:1, 2.) *Our Father, deliver us from evil!* And what must God do to deliver us? The answer is: it has already been done. That is what Jesus means when he cries out on the cross, "It is finished." Deliver us from evil? It has already been done.

One last question. If God has delivered us, then why should we pray? Why should we ask him to deliver us if it has already been done? Let us go over this once more, step by step. "All things are possible with God," Jesus said. And we said prayer is when we do things with God's help. Or, better still, prayer is *how*. Now then, the final step: more than what we do; *prayer is when and how God does something with us!*

Prayer is how God took Jesus Christ and his cross and delivered a



world from evil. "It is finished," said Jesus. And it was done by prayer. And every day it is by prayer God takes Jesus and his cross and delivers us from sin. Deliver us from evil? The cross is how God works his deliverance. And the Lord's Prayer is how God does *with us* what Jesus on the cross did *for us*.

*Scripture for Meditation*

Luke 18:1-8: "Men ought always to pray."

## THE SEVENTH WORD

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

It was nine o'clock in the morning when Jesus was crucified. The time is clearly indicated in Mark's gospel record. (See Mark 15:25.) But if Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock, then why do we wait until twelve noon to begin our Good Friday services? Why? Because noon is when the darkness came. "And it was about the sixth hour, (twelve o'clock noon), and there was a darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened." (Luke 23:44, 45.) *Three hours of darkness!*

We do not talk enough about this darkness. But those who were there never forgot. That terrible morning when Jesus was first put up on the cross the sun was shining. The curious were all there. The people who had come to see his death. They crowded around. They watched when the spikes were driven. They shouted when he was lifted up: "Now come down, if you can!" But Jesus gave them no sport. He had only one answer for their taunts: "Father, forgive." And so, when it was noon, when the darkness came; the curious went home.

Were they just a little fearful?

The three hours we keep on Good Friday are the darkness. Dur-

ing those hours they stayed who had to stay; the soldiers. And those who wanted to stay; the disciples. The others would have gone. "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost." (Luke 23:46.) Then, when Jesus died, the darkness was done.

When Jesus died! Have you ever realized that the Lord's Prayer does not mention death? Neither directly nor indirectly. All of us have said the prayer thousands of times. Where is the word for death?

There is an answer.

But first you must understand what death is for the Christian. Death is not the end of life for the Christian. Death is when we give ourselves to God in *our* darkness, as Jesus gave himself on the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." But where do we give ourselves in the Lord's Prayer? Consider:

Our Father  
Which art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done.

There! There is where we give ourselves to God. *Thy will be done* is the heart of the Lord's Prayer. Not our will. Not what we want. Not ourselves. *Thy will be done!* Our Father, we give ourselves to thee!

How completely Jesus gave himself all his life. And most of all in the garden at Gethsemane: "O my Father . . . not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). Because Jesus did give himself to God in how he lived, therefore, on the cross this is how he died: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

What does it mean to die? Who can say? Who of us knows about death? Save only this that, although he died on a cross, Jesus is not dead. He is alive. Easter is our great affirmation. Easter alone is all we know about death. And Easter alone is all we need! We know that death is not the end of life. Not for the Christian. Death is

## THE LORD'S PRAYER IN ACTION

for us what it was for Christ upon the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Death is when we give ourselves to God.

Everyday we pray the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, thy will be done." Not what we want. Not ourselves. His will be done. Everyday we give ourselves to God in prayer. And someday, when our darkness comes, then we shall do in that darkness what we have been doing every day. Can you live with these words from the cross, the Lord's Prayer in action? How can you live without them? The Lord's Prayer is for us everyday what this last word was for Jesus on the cross. It is the giving of ourselves to God.

### *Scripture for meditation*

Luke 2:29-35: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart."

## SECOND WEEK

■ They crucified the body of Jesus. They crucified his words as well. Actually, it was what he said that put Jesus on the cross. What he said, of course, can never be separated from what he was. Had Jesus kept silent or taken back his words there would have been no cross.

The crowd at the cross could see what happened when the body of Jesus was crucified. And on the gospel page we can see today what happens when the words of Christ are crucified. It must have been disturbing for those who saw the cross. And if we can bear to look it will be disturbing for us to see his teachings die. Only, now we know that death could neither hold him nor his teachings. We know that although the Beatitudes were once crucified they are now and forever triumphantly alive.

### THE BEATITUDES CRUCIFIED

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#### THE <sup>1</sup>FIRST WORD

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

When they crucified Christ they crucified his teaching. They took his words "Blessed are the merciful" and nailed them wide-armed upon the cross. And then, when they looked up to see those words this is what they found: "Father, forgive them." Do you believe it? Do you believe that each word from the cross is a beatitude crucified? In your devotions this week will you live with the seven words in the light of this faith?

*Each word from the cross is a beatitude crucified.*

We are the people who believe Christ's teaching. They call us Christians. And among Christians Alexander Whyte was one of Scotland's most Christlike. Once, a traveling evangelist set up tent

in Edinburgh. The evangelist caused quite a stir by criticizing other preachers. He particularly attacked a Dr. Wilson who was an outstanding Edinburgh minister. A parishioner came to Alexander Whyte:

"Pastor, I went to hear the evangelist last night. He said your friend, Dr. Wilson, is not a truly converted man."

Whyte leaped from his chair, eyes blazing, actually shouting, "That rascal! How dare he. Wilson is a converted man or no one is!"

The parishioner was taken aback. He had never seen his pastor angry. "But, Dr. Whyte, that is not all. The evangelist said you are not a converted man."

Whyte stopped short. All the fire went out of him. He sank back in his chair. Slowly he put his face into his hands. For a long moment he was silent. Then, looking up, he said to his visitor with an awful earnestness, "Leave me, my friend. I must examine my heart."

This week, will you examine your heart in the light of the cross? The cross is where Christ died. And when they crucified Jesus they crucified his teaching. And we are the people, so they say, who believe his teaching. Suppose someone asked, "Do you believe 'Blessed are the merciful?'"

(Remember, Jesus believed it. Even on the cross he forgave. Jesus was merciful.)

Suppose someone asked, "How can you be a truly converted Christian unless you believe *Blessed are the merciful*? Believe it enough to live it!" Phillips Brooks once spelled out what it means to be merciful. His words are a searching rebuke. They show how disturbing it is when we crucify Jesus' beatitude. Brooks says:

You who are letting miserable misunderstandings run on from year to year meaning to clear them up someday. You who are keeping wretched quarrels alive because you cannot quite make up your mind that now is the day to sacrifice your pride. You who are passing men sullenly upon the street "not speaking" out of some silly spite. And yet knowing it would fill your heart with shame and remorse if tomorrow morning you heard one of those men were dead. You who are letting a friend's heart ache for a

## THE BEATITUDES CRUCIFIED

word of appreciation or sympathy which you mean to give him someday. If you could only know that the "time is short" how it would break the spell. You would go instantly and do the thing which you might never have another chance to do.

"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." Dare we deny that we are still crucifying that today? Which means (what else can it mean?) we are still crucifying him today. Is this some of what scripture accuses when it speaks of those who "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh" (Heb. 6:6)? And what happens when we crucify Jesus' word "merciful"? The word *merciful* becomes *forgive*.

To live with the seven words means to examine your heart. In the nail-point words of Phillips Brooks, we must go "instantly"! We must ask whether the Beatitudes are lived or crucified in our daily lives. They were crucified long ago at Calvary. They are still being crucified today. It is almost as if the word "merciful" were itself a person! The person, of course, can only be Jesus. And when this word-in-the-person-of-Jesus is crucified, this is what he says: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Look and see. Each word from the cross is a beatitude crucified. Let us examine ourselves in the light of the cross. This week, let us hear what the Beatitudes say when they are lifted up.

*Scripture for meditation*

Mic. 6:6-8; Matt. 9:10-13: "To love mercy."

## THE SECOND WORD

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

In a little community there was a revival going on. An old-fashioned sawdust trail revival. And certain converts were so sure of themselves they began to doubt the spiritual soundness of others.

They got up a committee-to-save-souls. They decided to give their own church a spiritual house cleaning. First of all, the preacher! "He talks about being Christian," they said, "but let us ask him about his salvation."

And so, these self-appointed critics came to the pastor. "Preacher," they said, almost belligerently, "are you saved?" They did not seem to realize the arrogance of their cross-examination.

But the preacher was kindly. He gave them his answer. "Yes," he said, "I can tell you both the day and the hour. The day was Good Friday. And the hour was three o'clock in the afternoon."

That turn of answer caught his questioners off guard. They were suddenly ashamed. They had been judging by themselves. To them, salvation was in their own emotions. It was a precious possession for the privileged few. Now they saw that first, last, and always salvation is (it must be!) centered in Jesus Christ and his cross. Salvation is what Christ has done for us!

"Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." Suppose that committee-to-save-souls were to cross-examine this dying thief: "Are you saved?"

"Yes," he would answer, "and I can tell you both the day and the hour!"

Jesus himself said to this thief, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." Today. That day was Good Friday. The hour was near three o'clock in the afternoon. And ever since, that day of the cross has been our day of salvation.

Salvation is what Jesus did for the dying thief. But there were two thieves! As a committee-to-save-souls would you be willing to ask this *other* thief: "Are you saved?" He would surely say to us what he said to Jesus, "Save thyself" (Luke 23:39). He "railed" at Christ. His was like the angry refusal of those who say they don't need help from anybody: "Save yourself!"

Between the two thieves there is an eternal difference. One knows and cries out his need. The other defiantly says he doesn't need help from anybody. This is the difference Jesus forever marked when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poor in spirit? Yes, those who know they need God. Those

## THE BEATITUDES CRUCIFIED

who know that without God they are nothing. Those who cry out with the thief, "Lord, remember me!"

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . . though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries . . . though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains . . . and have not God (is not "charity" the love of God?), I am nothing." (I Cor. 13:1, 2.) *The poor in spirit.* Those who know that without God they are nothing! Those who see that the love of God in Christ is their only hope. Our utter need for God and the dying thief's need for Christ are really one and the same. And it was Christ who saved the dying thief.

Are you saved?

Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live." (Gal. 2:20.) Do we hear an objection? The chair recognizes the committee-to-save-souls.

"Paul," says the committee, "how can you be crucified with Christ? Only one man in history can say that; the dying thief!"

"No," says Paul, "I was there also. I too was crucified with Christ *in spirit.*"

Christians all across the centuries have learned to say: Blessed are those who are crucified *with* Christ in spirit. Blessed are those who know that without Christ they are spiritually nothing. Or, as Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Are you saved?

"Yes," they answer. All those who die with Christ and yet they live! "Yes," they say, "we are saved. We can tell you both the day and the hour. The day was Good Friday. And the hour was three o'clock in the afternoon."

The poor in spirit. This beatitude *was* crucified with Christ, even as the dying thief. And Jesus' word for this crucified beatitude is the same as it was for the thief. "Today," he says, "shalt thou be with me. . . ." And it is so. The poor in spirit live with him today, and always.

### *Scripture for meditation*

Rev. 3:17-22: "Because thou sayest, I am rich."



## THE THIRD WORD

*"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"*

There is a well-known painting of Mary, brokenhearted. John is leading her away from the crucifixion. On Mary's face the artist has pictured her sorrow. But in her hand she is carrying (would you have dared paint it this way?) the crown of thorns. In the artist's imagining Mary had "stood by" until the very end. And when they took Jesus down from the cross she had taken the crown of thorns from his lifeless head. Only then, with the crown of thorns in her hand, was Mary willing to leave the cross.

*Blessed are they that mourn.* Is it true? There are some of the Beatitudes that we instinctively know are true: Blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart! We ourselves may not be merciful or pure. And yet, though every man be a sinner, we will all confess that these are true. But this: Blessed are they that mourn? We refuse to believe this. We cry out that it is not so. And Jesus says, "Woman, behold thy son!" Jesus with the crown of thorns on his brow and Mary with the crown of thorns in her hand. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted? Is it true?

Suppose it were *not* true. Suppose there were no blessing in sorrow. Suppose Jesus on the cross saw his mother. But so what? Jesus does not care. (Just suppose!) Why do they stand there, he thinks. They ought to have sense enough to go home and let him die. Instead, like leeches, they hang on to the last. The irritation of a Christ who does not care! Suppose there were no blessing in sorrow.

When someone we love is deathbed sick why do we wait patiently at the bedside? Because there may come one moment when our beloved will know we are there. We wait so that the someone we love will know we are there. But why torture yourself with waiting? There is no blessing in sorrow. Or, is there? *Can it be* that sorrow is only the other, the deeper, side of love? Blessed are those who love; for when sorrow comes they shall be comforted!

In Mary's face the artist pictured the agony of her sorrow. And

## THE BEATTITUDES CRUCIFIED

in her hand she is carrying the crown of thorns. But what comfort is there in a crown of thorns? Or, do you now understand that the most treasured moment in Mary's life was when Jesus wearing that crown looked down and saw her and John. Jesus saw that they were standing by. He saw in their faces the sorrow and love. That is why they were there! "Woman, behold thy son!"

Sorrow is the other, the deeper side of love. *Blessed are they that mourn.* Is it true?

Mary! Here is water of forgetfulness. Drink it and every remembrance will be wiped out, even this cross.

"Give me," says Mary, "let me drink and forget my anguish."

But Mary, you will also forget the joy of his birth.

"I want to forget those times when I misunderstood him."

But wait, Mary. Do you want to forget *this* time when you stood by him?

"Well, at least, let me forget how they hated him."

Mary, would you forget how he *loved* them?

Now do you see why when Mary left the cross she chose to take the crown of thorns? *Blessed are they that mourn.* Sorrow is that miracle whereby Mary can look at a crown of thorns and see the love of her Son. And sorrow is that miracle today whereby we can look at pain and death (even the cross!) and yet we see the love of God. Blessed are they that mourn? Is it true? Thank God they are both true, this beatitude *and* the cross!

Turn your face. Say you don't care. Save yourself from sorrow. There are some of us who try to do just that! May God forgive us. Would we crucify "love" in order to get rid of sorrow? They call Jesus "Man of sorrows." But we call him "Christ of love." We may read his words in sorrow but we live his words in love. We have seen his beatitude crucified but now we know it risen and alive.

And we *are* comforted.

*Scripture for meditation*

Lam. 1:12-16: "If there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow."

## THE <sup>1</sup>FOURTH WORD 4

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

At the last supper Jesus gathered his disciples. "One of you," he said, "shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord is it I?" (Matt. 26:21, 22.)

Let us gather the Beatitudes here at the cross: "One of you is the very heart of the crucifixion." And almost as if they were living people the Beatitudes begin to say, "Lord, is it I?"

*The poor in spirit* say, "Is it I?"

No, you belong to the dying thief.

*They that mourn* say, "Is it I?"

No, you belong to Mary and John.

*The merciful* say, "Is it I?"

No, you are the first word of forgiveness.

Each word from the cross is a beatitude crucified. But which one is this fourth word, "forsaken"? Is it *Blessed are the meek? They which do hunger and thirst? The peacemakers—*

Peace?

When Jesus was born the angels sang it: "Glory to God, and on earth peace." And the scripture says, "ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace." (Eph. 2:13, 14.) Or to make it even more certain: "peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). He is our peace! *Blessed are the peacemakers*. Crucify that and you have the heart of the crucifixion. Which is to say that in the war against God Jesus Christ on the cross is our only hope for peace. The war against God? All hatred, all dissension, all prejudice, all evil is a war against God.

Divorce, for example, is when two people turn against each other. Is it? Go deeper. At the very heart of every divorce you will find a war against God.

Segregation is when one race turns against others. Is it? Go deeper.

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At the very heart of racial hatred you will find a war against God.

Strikes and lockouts. Is it merely labor and management defying each other? Go deeper. At the heart of our economic disputes you will find a war against God.

Armies on a battlefield. Nations against nations? Go deeper. At the very heart of any man-made conflict you will always find a war against God!

From the garden of Eden until today the whole history of the human heart is a rebellion against God. Jesus said it. "Out of the heart," he said, "proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Matt. 15:19.) And these are things which make human life a hell on earth. It is our hearts that are in rebellion against God. Is there no way for peace? Yes. But who could have thought it would be this way: a man on a cross and a terrible cry! "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Christ is our peace. In the words of Isaiah we see him: "wounded for our transgressions . . . bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace . . . upon him" (Isa. 53:5). He is our peace. Our hope is gathered up in his "forsaken" cry. Was Jesus forsaken of God? How can that be? This cry is the heart of the crucifixion, yes. But the cross *ends* with Jesus commending his spirit to God! And yet, somehow on the cross Jesus knows what it feels like as if he were utterly Godforsaken. He knows so that (God be thanked!) we need never know. Somehow, in this cry from the cross, the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed be Jesus for he is our peace with God. With God! But what about others? The war against God always involves others: broken homes, race riots, business suicides, bombs that can blast a whole city! How can there be any peace with God when there are still these others? If God were really God, would not his very heart break? *His heart did break!* God is God! That is what this heartbroken cry from the cross means. The Lord God laid upon himself the chastisement of our peace. God's heart did break.

Today, in Japan, most of Hiroshima has now been rebuilt since the bomb. But in the center of the city they have kept the ruins of what was once their exhibition building. It stands as a memorial.

And on a sign there is one word: "PEACE." Today, in a world triggered with H-bombs what hope is there for peace? The cry of Christ goes up like an echo from our hearts: O God, hast thou forsaken us? But God has not forsaken us. The cross is his memorial standing in the midst of history. And on it one word: PEACE. *Blessed are the peacemakers.* Crucify that. And blessed be God forever who has given us his Son, our peace through the blood of his cross.

*Scripture for meditation*

Mark 4:35-41: "How is it that ye have no faith?"

## THE FIFTH WORD

*"I thirst."*

Jesus was not ashamed to ask. He had no false pride. He asked. And when the soldiers heard his cry "I thirst," one of them ran. He took a sponge, soaked it with his own ration of sour wine and put it on a reed. He "ran" says scripture, and held it up for Jesus to drink. (Matt. 27:48.)

"I thirst." Jesus was not ashamed to ask. *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness* (blessed are they who are not ashamed to ask) *for they shall be filled.* Do you remember how desperately Jesus prayed at Gethsemane? "O my Father," he asked, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." (Matt. 26:39.) The cross was a cup of suffering. Jesus *asked* God to take it away. The cross was a cup he did not want to drink. But does not the beatitude say blessed are they which do thirst?

Put them together, the cross and the beatitude! This is what they mean: The blessing God gives is not always what we ask. Nevertheless, his blessing always satisfies. He fills our hearts to overflowing. *My cup runneth over.*

## THE BEATITUDES CRUCIFIED

There is a strange writing. No one seems to know who wrote it. Sometimes it almost needs an explanation. Other times it explains itself. It is the story of someone who prayed:

He asked for strength that he might achieve.

He was made weak that he might obey.

He asked for power that he might do great things.

He was given pain that he might do better things.

He asked for wealth that he might be in comfort.

He was made poor that he might be in sympathy.

He asked for success that he might have the praise of men.

He was given failure that he might feel the need of God.

He asked for all things that he might enjoy life.

He was given life that he might enjoy all things.

He received nothing that he asked for . . .

And yet all that he hoped for. *His prayer was answered.*

How is it when we pray? God may not give the blessings we ask. Nevertheless he will fill our hearts to overflowing. Do you agree? Consider Jesus. He was not ashamed to ask. He asked God to take away the cup. Yet God gave him to drink from a sponge. God did not give what Jesus asked. Yet God gave all he hoped for. Gethsemane's prayer was wonderfully answered.

✧ Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after *righteousness*. What is "righteousness"? What is this for which we are supposed to thirst? Jesus says it is being persecuted, reviled, all manner of evil against you. (Matt. 5:10, 11.) This is righteousness? Do you thirst for it? Like that cup of Jesus at Gethsemane, is this what you want filled up to the full?

What is righteousness? It is what put Jesus on the cross. He was righteous. And yet God made Jesus, says the scripture, "to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the *righteousness* of God in him" (II Cor. 5:21). Jesus himself *was* righteous. He hungered and thirsted after righteousness. But still, God made him to be sin for us. God did not give Jesus what he asked. Jesus pleaded, "take this cup from me." But God gave him the very dregs.

God did not give what Jesus asked, yet Gethsemane's prayer was wonderfully answered.

"After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst." There on the cross, no cup. Only a sponge, pressed to our Lord's parched lips. Nevertheless Jesus drank of that and was filled. He was filled *with the knowing*. He knew he had done God's will. He knew all things were now accomplished. He knew the blessedness of hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

"I thirst." This word of Jesus is the beatitude crucified. And on the cross, in him, all righteousness is forever fulfilled. There is a prayer in which we Christians ask to be "filled with all the fullness of God." Ask God for that. Do not be ashamed to ask. God may not give exactly what you ask. But what he gives will wonderfully fill your life. And even if it means carrying your cross after Christ, ask God for that. It will be your blessing. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness."

*Scripture for meditation*

II. Cor. 4:6-11: "Persecuted, but not forsaken."

## THE SIXTH WORD

*"It is finished."*

Sometimes, without warning, the sun blazes out in an explosion of solar flame eight thousand miles high. Within thirty minutes cosmic rays penetrate the earth's atmosphere; everything, everybody in it. International communication is completely blacked out. Overseas circuits, ship-to-shore radio; all disrupted. The cause? *Sunspots*. What are sunspots? Explosive gases that burst with the force of millions of H-bombs. And immediately, we feel the effects

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thirty minutes away. If God wants to destroy the earth He only needs to unleash the power of the sun. And we are finished.

What does God want with the earth?

*Meekness!* "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." Someday we will understand what meekness is and who the meek are! Meekness is doing what God wants. And Jesus did what God wanted. Jesus prayed, "not my will, but thine be done." And what Jesus prayed he did. Did it wholeheartedly, completely. Nothing was left undone. On the cross Jesus could say to God: "It is finished."

Meekness, plain and simple, is obedience to the will of God. The word *meek* comes from the training of wild animals. It is the plunging fury of a bronco *broken* to the bridle. It is the *controlled* power of a high spirited horse. The meek are the *God-tamed*. Today, at the flick of a finger, the modern driver controls what we still call "horsepower." Just so, the meek are the *God-controlled*. True meekness is obedience to the will of God. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

On the cross Jesus said, "It is finished." What is? This word of Jesus must never be read as if it were merely the finish of his suffering. Jesus did not say *I am* finished. He said *it is finished*. When Jesus said, "I thirst," he was speaking of himself. But now, without question, he is speaking of his work. Without question? Dare we be so sure?

It is the evangelist John who gives us this word "finished." Let us ask him:

John, are you sure Jesus means "it" is finished? Perhaps he only means his sufferings are done, "I" am finished?

"No," says John, "I was there. I remember. That night before the cross when we were all together at the last supper I remember his prayer. Jesus said, 'Father, I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do'" (John 17:4).

Finished. What God wanted Jesus did. God's will was the lifelong prayer of Jesus, his God-controlled obedience. Or, if you want it in one word: *meekness*.

"It is finished." This word from the cross is meekness crucified.



What God wanted Jesus did. And the cross is what God wanted. But why? Why the cross?

Have you ever considered that the precise moment when human hands drove that first nail into the flesh of Jesus, God could have unleashed the power of the sun and utterly destroyed the earth. If God had wanted! But God did not want, God does not want our destruction. God wants our *love*. And God suffered his Son to die on a cross to show us that no matter what we do to him, he wants our love. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16.)

The cross is the suffering love of God. The long-suffering love of God; slow to anger! (Ps. 103:8.) The cross is the work God gave Jesus to do. Jesus understood and accepted. Do we understand? Do we see the God-controlled obedience in Jesus? Do we realize what meekness crucified means? It means God does not want to destroy. God wants for us to inherit the earth. Jesus understood. "The work which thou hast given me to do," he prayed. And what God wanted Jesus did. The cross is meekness crucified.

"Blessed are the meek." Is there any meekness in us? Is there any God-controlled obedience in us? Are we doing what God wants? The words of Jesus are the work God wants us to do. And these seven words from his cross! Are we learning to live with them? Or are we merely reading them, day by day?

*Scripture for meditation*

Num. 12:3-16: "Now the man . . . was very meek."

## THE SEVENTH WORD

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

Open your Bible to the Gospel of Matthew, the fifth chapter. Find the Beatitudes. Now, read them slowly one by one. And at

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each separate beatitude ask yourself: how did Jesus sound that day when he first spoke them? Pompous? Did he speak in full round tones as a political orator would making a convention speech? Are the Beatitudes a sort of spiritual "platform"? So many people seem to read them as if they are a blueprint for some program of social action. How did Jesus sound when he spoke them?

Did the disciples ever ask Jesus to talk about himself?

"Master, why not talk to others the way you do to us? Tell them these things that mean so much in your own personal life. Master, if only others knew you as we do, everyone would be your disciple!"

Surely Jesus would not take the secret things of his own soul and carelessly lay them open for others to see! And yet, did the disciples ever ask Jesus to speak about his own inward life? And if he did, how would he do it? Reverently, let us try to imagine. Would Jesus speak slowly? Not so much as if he were teaching, but rather, more as if he were remembering. Would he speak quietly? Not so much as if he were talking to others, but more as if he were talking to himself:

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness . . . blessed are the merciful . . . blessed are they (No! It comes closer home than that)! Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you."

When Jesus spoke the Beatitudes he was doing that most difficult of all things. He was putting into words his own spiritual life. Dare we believe it? And if you believe it, ask yourself at each separate beatitude: *when Jesus said this was he thinking of the cross?* This much is sure. The Beatitudes teach what it takes inwardly in order to suffer the cross outwardly. Say it how you will. In some profound sense the two belong together. Each word from the cross is a beatitude crucified.

"Let this mind be in you," says Paul, "which was also in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 2:5.) But who of us can possibly know the mind of Christ? *That* is why we have the Beatitudes! They give us the mind of Christ. They let us share his inner life. Go to your Bible. Read them one by one. At each separate beatitude say to yourself: this is what it takes *inwardly* in order to suffer the cross the way Jesus

## LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

did. For example: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." Was Jesus thinking of the cross? Certainly *on* the cross he saw God! "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." There is no separating them now. Jesus *pure* in heart and Jesus *sure* of God; the beatitude *and* the cross!

Someone once told the story of a little girl who had a cut in the soft flesh of her eyelid. Nothing serious, but it would require stitches in order to heal. The doctor did not want to use an anesthetic. He told the little girl he could make her cut well, but he would have to stick her with a needle first.

"Can you stand it without moving?" he asked.

Quite simply, she said, "I can if my Daddy will hold my hand."

So the father took her in his lap, steadied her head against his shoulder, slipped his arm around her waist, and took her two hands in his. The doctor forced the needle through four times, twice for each stitch. The child did not even flinch. A little girl, *sure* of her father!

Jesus on the cross, *sure* of God. He gives himself into his father's hand. But what does it take inwardly?

Read with your Bible open before you: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." Was Jesus thinking of the cross? At this last word, look and see. And behold! Jesus on the cross; his heart completely sure of God: "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit."

One sentence more. It is this living with the seven words; this living with the beatitudes crucified that makes us, as Christians, sure of God!

*Scripture for meditation*

Ps. 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart."

## THIRD WEEK

### THE WORDS OF HIS FLESH

■ Some years ago a religious magazine asked outstanding clergymen to list, in order of importance, the ten books that had most influenced their ministry. Other pastors followed with interest to see how many of the books they themselves had read. There was one title that appeared high up on many lists. It was *The Days of His Flesh* by David Smith. Evidently that book had served to make the earthly life of Jesus come alive. And of course, the days of Jesus' flesh can never be separated from the days of his risen power.

This week in Lent let us take our suggestion from David Smith's title. Let us live with the cross as *The Words of His Flesh*. Let us pay attention to the physical sense of the Seven Words, as well as to their spiritual meaning. And let us remember that the words of Jesus can never be separated from *The Word* God speaks in our hearts day by day. As Paul reminds us: "The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart." (Rom. 10:8, 9.)

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### THE <sup>1</sup>FIRST WORD

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

When the Romans scourged a man they bent him double over a post that was something like the stump of a tree and about as high as a barrel. Head and arms would hang down on one side, legs on the other. A man would be literally tied over top the whipping post like a clumsy sack of meal. His arms and legs, hanging down, were bound tight around the post so that he could not possibly

move. The whip used in scourging was made with leather strips fastened at the end of a wooden handle. Each leather thong was weighted at the tip with chunks of lead or brass. With a soldier's full swing the scourge would be laid across the helpless victim's bare back. Every stroke would bring blood. The suffering, intense! The beaten body, frightfully lacerated! Veins and muscles would be laid open. Sometimes even a man's insides, exposed. This is set down here only because many times we forget the place where scripture says that Pilate "delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified" (Mark 15:15).

Today, when the modern state executes a condemned prisoner it is done quickly and painlessly. But it was the deliberate policy of Rome to make execution painful as a warning to others. That is why they nailed Jesus to a cross and hung him up in public to die a lingering death. Today, before we execute a man we feed him with kindness. "The condemned man ate heartily." We all know what that means. But the Romans never practiced this strange contradiction of kindness and killing. Before they sent a man to the cross they scourged him. Sometimes so brutally a man would die under the lash before he even got to the cross.

Perhaps the cross, by itself, is all the horror we today can bear. We shudder at the thought of human flesh hammered through with nails, hung on planks of wood. Perhaps most of us cannot quite bring ourselves to face this other fact, that the scourging was part of Jesus' crucifixion. But the scripture says Pilate delivered Jesus to be crucified *when he had scourged him*.

Listen. Before Jesus speaks this first word from the cross, did you hear it? The terrible sound of the scourge scorching its brand marks into the flesh of Jesus' back. Unless you are shocked into silence by every whistling cut of the whip you are not yet ready to hear Jesus say: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.*"

Forgive who? Pilate and the soldiers? They scourged and nailed him. And it was deliberate cruelty that shoved a crown of thorns down over Jesus' brow. Forgive them?

"Father, forgive *them*."

Forgive who? Caiaphas and the priests? They arrested Jesus,

condemned him. They followed him with a hatred that was not satisfied until they saw him dead. Forgive them?

"Father, forgive *them*."

Forgive who? Judas and the disciples? It was one of his own who betrayed Jesus. It was the man like a rock who denied him. They all forsook him and fled. Forgive them?

"Father, forgive *them*."

Forgive who? The dying thief and his fellow? On either side of Jesus they were both blaspheming and cursing in the blind rage of their pain. And that vicious crowd of people! They came only for the sight of blood. Like the crowds of today who pay for the thrill of seeing suffering and call it sport!

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

*Who* is being forgiven? We are. All of us. He was wounded for *our* transgressions, bruised for *our* iniquities, the chastisement of *our* peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:5). Those stripes of scourging laid across Jesus' flesh were suffered *for us*. And his prayer of forgiveness was *prayed for us*.

Our Father, *forgive us*; for we know not what we do! The cross is not just the terrible spectacle of something that happened once long ago. It is the terrible truth of something that still happens inside our own hearts. How can we live with this word and yet let those things happen in our hearts that mock him, condemn him, betray him, crucify him? Our Father, forgive us; for we know not what we do!

And Jesus still pleads, "Father, forgive *them*."

### *Scripture for meditation*

Acts 8:18-25: "Perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee."

## THE SECOND WORD

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

"Then came the soldiers and brake the legs of the first, and of the other. . . . But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs." (John 19:32, 33.) Why did they break the legs of the two thieves? In a book translated from the French, *A Doctor at Calvary*,<sup>1</sup> a surgeon carefully studies what would be the actual, specific, final cause of death in a crucifixion. He gives his opinion in one word: asphyxia (suffocation).

The surgeon's reasons, in brief, are as follows. On a cross the weight of a man's body hangs from his two hands. The nail itself is actually driven into the wrists, between bones. (The palms of the hands would soon tear through with a man's weight.) What happens, then, when you hang by your hands and try to breathe? This. In order to breathe you must somehow raise yourself to release the breathing muscles that have all been pulled taut.

When you hang by your hands a terrible pain of cramp and contraction begins. First, in the forearm; then in the arms. The cramp spreads: the legs, the trunk, and at last, the great muscles you use to breathe. You can *take in* air, but you cannot let it out. The lungs fill. The chest expands. The face goes red; then violet. A terrible sweat begins to flow. When you hang by your hands you can live only so long as you have strength to draw yourself up for breath. Therefore, gradually, as your strength goes you die of suffocation.

However, when a man is crucified they also nail his feet. Which is worse? The muscle cramp that comes hanging by the hands? Or the terrible pain when you straighten your legs trying to push up for breath? How did men ever manage to live for hours upon the cross? Only by this dreadful alternation, up and down. First, hanging by the hands, which means a gradual suffocation until the lungs are almost bursting. Then, the agony of forcing yourself to lift up

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Barbet (New York; P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1953).

by straightening your legs against that searing spike in the feet.

Now do you see, according to the surgeon, why they broke the legs of the two thieves? They did not want to kill them outright. But a man with his legs broken can no longer force himself up for breath. The strength in his arms is gone. He twists into convulsions of cramp. When he actually dies it is *suffocation*.

Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." (John 12:32.) Bluntly, to be lifted up means to hang by the hands until dead. Forget the pictures where artists sometimes so delicately represent Jesus with his arms outstretched on a cross. Jesus was hanging by his hands. And does it trouble you that they did not need to break the legs of Jesus? The terrible beating, the sleepless night, the Gethsemane prayer of blood; in these hours his strength was gone!

Did you know that, if you count them by your watch, the seven words from the cross take less than thirty seconds? Why did Jesus speak only these few words? Why? Just as artists sometimes make Jesus look as if he were only resting on the cross; just so, the seven words are sometimes read as if Jesus is serenely speaking from the cross. It is not so! Hanging by his hands, every word must have cost Jesus an agony of precious breath and awful pain. And yet Jesus wrenches out his very life for that thief beside him! "Verily I say unto thee." (Break what Jesus says into little pieces. Put a gasp for breath at every break. Perhaps then you will begin to understand!) "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."

"And I, if I be lifted up . . . will draw all men unto me." We are not forced. Instead, we are somehow strangely drawn. To live with the seven words day by day is the spiritual experience of being drawn closer to Christ. But have you forgotten? There were *two* thieves! One believed. The other cursed to the end. One was drawn. The other is the fearful truth that we are not forced. *We are not forced*. And yet, whosoever will turn to the cross and pray, "Lord, remember me," to him *and to us* Jesus says, "Today, shalt thou be with me."



*Scripture for meditation*

Luke 9:57-62: "Lord, I will follow thee; but. . . ."

## THE THIRD WORD

*"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"*

Have you ever known a mother to cherish a photograph of her son? She shows it to you. All you see is a face. You note the features. Glasses? Hair thinning? Does the mouth suggest kindness, humor? Such is about all there is to see when you look at a photograph. But the mother! She sees the little baby once held in her arms. She sees the six-year-old starting off to school. She sees the night of sickness; her boy's face white with weakness. All this a mother sees. She does not *look at* the picture, she *looks through* it and sees all the picture means in a lifetime of love.

In Jesus' day they did not have photographs. There was no way to capture a likeness and keep it in a snapshot. But did Mary wear a cross? Did she hold it sometimes in her hand? Did she *look through* the cross the way a mother today looks through a picture? Did Mary see all that the cross means in a lifetime of love?

This third word from the cross is like a treasured "snapshot." Surely it brought back to Mary all the days of his flesh. Today we wear the cross in honor of Christ. But to Mary the cross must always have meant that last tender word when Jesus said, "Woman, behold thy son!"

The Jews have given us a priceless heritage. They have taught what it means to honor thy father and thy mother. What is it that binds families together at their best? For an answer, look at this "snapshot" of the cross. See there? Mary. A mother standing by her son when the world has turned against him. See there? John. A friend who counts it his privilege to care for someone else's mother as though she were his own. And there? Jesus. A son who denies

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his own agony until he has spoken the word that will care for his widowed mother. When Jesus spoke to Mary he put into words what the Jews put into history!

The ancient world looked at a woman as a slave to be bought and sold. The Jews looked at a woman as a wife to be loved. A mother to be honored. The rights of modern women today stand on this foundation of the Jewish family. And the Jewish family at its finest was chosen by God when the time came for Jesus. God gave Jesus to the care of Mary because of what she could give to Jesus.

What did God want Mary to give? Wealth? Her peasant's home in Nazareth, plain and crude, with whitewashed stone and earthen floor! Mary could not give wealth. Nor could she give learning. She was only a maid in a village. No knowledge of the outside world. None of the wisdom of schools, the knowledge of books. Mary could not give wealth or learning. Nor could she give social position. There were no really prominent people where Jews grew up. Even at their good-humored best people used to say, "can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46.)

Nevertheless Mary did give Jesus two things God wanted him to have. She gave him *the influence of a pure heart*. There is something simple, sincere, and unspoiled that sings through the soul of Mary. You can hear it in the words of her Magnificat. Not many have such a gift. It is so rare and precious most of us do not know its value. But, as a gift from Mary, Jesus knew it when he said, "Blessed are the pure in heart."

And then, Mary gave Jesus *her own sense of God*. No other people have had such a brooding and ever-present awareness of God. Even the humblest Jewish home had on its doorpost a tiny case containing writings from the scripture, i.e., the word of God. And in the lilies of the field; in the house of the Lord; in the prayers from the Psalms; it was Mary who opened the mind and soul of the infant Jesus to the power and presence of God.

All this Mary gave to Jesus. And from the cross, all this was blessed by Jesus as he said to his mother, "Woman, behold thy son!" Did Mary wear a cross?

All mothers and children wear a cross when they live with this word of Jesus' flesh as Mary and John lived it.

*Scripture for meditation*

Luke 1:46-56: "My soul doth magnify the Lord."

## THE <sup>1</sup>FOURTH WORD 4

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

A youngster asked in a Sunday-school class: "How long was Jesus dead?" Without stopping to think the teacher started to say, "Why three days, of course, from Good Friday until . . ." Then the teacher stopped. Those three days! Was Jesus dead? Physically, yes. But! And all at once the teacher saw what the youngster was really asking.

How long was Jesus dead? Does your mind and heart race to this fourth word from the cross? The gospel says, "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabach-thani? which is being interpreted . . ." (Mark 15:34). How long was Jesus dead? *Jesus was only dead*, really dead, long enough to know what it means when you say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

What is death? Is it when the physical body stops living? If so, then Jesus was dead from Good Friday until Easter. No more. For then (thanks be to God!) the very physical body of his death was gone. But surely no one is so naïve as to suppose that the cross of Christ is simply a matter of physical torture and physical death! The cross means there is something *more* to death than mere physical dying. And it is this something more than physical dying that Jesus took to himself when he cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Forsaken! The awful sense that a human soul can feel itself separated from God, forsaken. Was Jesus himself *ever* separated

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from God? Even on the cross? Do not believe it. And yet this questioning cry of Jesus nevertheless forces us to believe that Jesus did know to the full what it feels like to be separated from God.

What is it that separates the human soul from God? Sin. And scripture puts this awful word "sin" upon Jesus himself. Scripture says that God "made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin." (II Cor. 5:21.) In plain words: just as God made Christ to be sin *even though he never sinned*; just so, Jesus knew what it is like to be separated from God *even though he was never separated!* This is what Jesus' word "forsaken" means.

Dare we believe that Jesus was not separated from God even in this "forsaken" cry from the cross? Yes, because the word of scripture is so unmistakably clear. At the very place where the scripture says that God made Jesus to be sin (who knew no sin); at the very same place the scripture also says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (II Cor. 5:19). Even on the cross God was not separated from Christ. *God was in Christ!* The cross *was God* giving of himself. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."

So then. What does this tragic, bewildering, mysterious word from the cross mean? This cry of death? It means that God himself in Jesus Christ our Lord; God himself who cannot die; God himself understands to the full what death is like! And because of Jesus Christ we who are his followers need have no fear of death, the mere physical dying. Because of Jesus Christ we need not fear *the death* (see Luke 12:4, 5) that is worse than physical dying. Because of Jesus Christ we who are his followers believe there is nothing in death but a door to eternal life. Jesus said, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

How long was Jesus dead? A child's question. But it takes God himself to answer. And God's eternal answer is in this cry from the cross: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is being interpreted . . ." How long was Jesus dead? In the deeper sense Jesus was dead, really dead, only long enough to know what it means when you say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

There is a passage where the New Testament says, "We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man" (Heb. 2:9). What is the taste of death? It is this word of his flesh. This terrible cry from his cross! *We see Jesus*, says the scripture. To live with the seven words means to look at him. It means to see him crowned with glory and honor, Jesus who tasted death for every one of us. And because of his cross (thanks be to God!) no one of us will ever need to know the *taste* of death.

*Scripture for meditation*

John 11:14-26: "Whosoever . . . believeth in me shall never die."

## THE FIFTH WORD

*"I thirst."*

There is a novel by Richard Jefferies called *Bevis, The Story of a Boy*. In it is a mention of the crucifixion. The boy is turning the pages of a book when, suddenly, he comes to a picture of Christ on the cross. Distress shows on the face of the boy as he studies the picture. He sees the cruel nails, the unfeeling spear. The boy is obviously upset. He looks at the picture a long time. Then, slowly, he turns the page saying, "If God had been there he would not have let them do it!"

If God had been there! Could there ever be any more dramatic twist of words? The whole of Christianity rests on the faith that *God was there!* Christ lived in faith that God would always be with him. However, it is one thing to live in faith. It is something else to die in it! And now Christ has suffered what the cross can do. Now he has met evil at its worst. And yet God is still with him. Now Christ has fulfilled his faith and found that it does truly overcome.

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"After this, Jesus knowing that all things were *now* accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst." Now!

Why *now*?

Do you know the knife of thirst that stabs inside your throat when your mouth is parched and you try to swallow? Even a little water can ease that fierce cutting pain. A trickle squeezed out of a sponge! Remember the rich man in torment who begged for someone just to dip the tip of a finger in water and come and cool his tongue? (Luke 16:24.) Can thirst be any more vivid than that? But imagine this: the dehydrated thirst of one who has been bleeding; the suffering of one who has already had an agony of sweat poured out of him; the noonday sun and lips that have long been dry beyond any moistening of the tongue! Who of us can ever rightly imagine this word of Jesus' flesh: "I thirst."

But why *now*?

Why is it only *now* Jesus speaks the word of his suffering? Why not when they drove the spikes? Why not when they lifted him up? Why not in the excruciating cramp and binding of muscles that could no longer move? Why is it that only *now* Jesus speaks his pain and says, "I thirst"?

The answer is all in the word *after*. "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished . . ." Do you remember the temptation of Jesus and how the gospel says he fasted forty days and forty nights and "was afterward an hungred" (Matt. 4:2)? Only when the struggle of temptation was done, only then *afterward* did Jesus consider the hunger of his body. Somehow, it is exactly the same with this thirst of the cross. Jesus' physical suffering is beyond our imagining. But more desperate than his body was the suffering of his faith. And when this faith had been accomplished, only then did Jesus consider the suffering of his body. "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished . . . saith, I thirst."

Do you believe that the crucial word of the cross is a cry to God: "Why hast thou forsaken me?" And do you believe that this forsaken cry is actually a triumphant affirmation of trust in God? If so, then you can understand the word "after." Just as in the days of his temptation when Jesus was afterward an hungred; just so, in this

supreme testing of the cross he was afterward athirst. After the cross has done its worst and can do no more; after Jesus has fulfilled his faith; after all things have been accomplished now the cry comes: "I thirst."

Remember, after the temptation, when Jesus was an hungred? Scripture says, "Behold, angels came and ministered unto him." (Matt. 4:11.) And in this afterward of thirst there was another angel. This one, unawares. An angel in the disguise of a soldier. An angel who ran and took a sponge and filled it with vinegar and put it on a reed and gave Jesus to drink. (Matt. 27:48.) Anyone who hears a word of suffering and, in response, does a deed of mercy is a ministering angel. Any one of us! Even though we do it (*inasmuch* as we do it) unto one of the least. Nevertheless it is still Jesus who says, "I thirst." It is the word of his flesh that prompts us for the living of these days.

*Scripture for meditation*

I Chr. 11:15-19: "Oh that one would give me drink."

## THE SIXTH WORD

*"It is finished."*

In the play *Green Pastures* there is a reverent and powerful passage when God looks down from a window in heaven and watches what is happening on the cross. Onstage there is a moment of silence, hushed and terrible, as God watches. And all at once, God covers his face with his hands.

Let us ask ourselves, reverently. Did all the angels of creation stand at the windows of heaven watching Christ upon his cross? And, like God himself, was there one sudden moment when they too covered their eyes and could not bear to look?

Scientists tell us that an atomic explosion has such terrific heat

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and brilliance that it can cook the inside tissue of an eye like the hard boiled white of an egg. At night, even as much as twenty-five miles away, the open eye looking directly at the flash will suffer permanent blindness. Out in Yucca Flats, one of America's atomic tests was staged before the eye of television. All America saw it. People sat in their parlors waiting, watching. They saw the observers put on heavy black goggles. They heard the countdown: "ten seconds . . . five, four, three, two, one." Then, all at once, the TV camera "eye" was covered. Even the camera could not stand to look at the actual instant of explosion.

When Jesus was crucified; when God and all his angels were watching, waiting; did some voice count down the seconds until that last terrible moment when they could not bear to look? That last terrible moment! Do you realize what it meant for Jesus to cry, "It is finished"? Consider. Ever since the beginning of creation God had been preparing. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting." (Ps. 90:2.) God had been getting ready for this one tremendous moment when it would be finished: the cross!

T. S. Eliot has the poet's gift. He can say in a few words what others take pages to convey. He says:

This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.<sup>1</sup>

Is that the way *God's* world ends? Not if you know the gospel! The angels watching from the windows of heaven saw the way the world ends. They saw a savior upon a cross. God reconciling the world unto himself. Jesus crying with a loud voice, "It is finished."

John's gospel tells us what Jesus said. But the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us *how* he said it. This word from the cross was no whimper. Three times the gospels plainly say, "Jesus cried with a loud voice." (Mark 15:37; Matt. 27:50; Luke 23:46.)

<sup>1</sup> From *Collected Poems 1909-1935* by T. S. Eliot, copyright, 1936, by Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., and reprinted with their permission and that of Faber and Faber Ltd., London.



*Finished!* God forgive lest we ever read these words with a whimper. Jesus cried with a loud voice. The scripture repeatedly mentions the act of this "loud" voice. This voice of his flesh! The voice itself tells its own story.

For one tragic moment perhaps the angels did cover their eyes. But then, in the silence, they heard this triumphant cry: "It is finished." Think of the shout that must then have rolled out from the windows of heaven! *Glory to God in the highest. It is finished!*

That explosion out on Yucca Flats when they covered the eye of the TV camera. They called it, "Operation Doorstep." Which is to say that although it happened two thousand miles away, nevertheless the danger stands at the doorstep of every home in America. Just so, the cross is God's "Operation Doorstep." Which is to say that although it happened two thousand years ago, nevertheless the cross stands at the doorstep of every human heart. Nearer than breathing, closer than hands or feet; this word of Jesus cries out in our inmost hearts. Indeed, to live with the Seven Words means to let them live in us. And when they live in our hearts, only then can they begin to live in our flesh. It is the word of his flesh that works in us the salvation that was once and for all *finished* upon the cross!

*Scripture for meditation*

I Cor. 15:35-50: "And there is a spiritual body."

## THE SEVENTH WORD

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

Did Mary make a birthday cake  
For Christ when He was small,

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And think the while she frosted it,  
How quickly boys grow tall?

Did Joseph carve some foolish thing  
From extra bits of wood,  
An ox, a camel, or a bird,  
Because the Christ was good?

Oh, sometimes years are very long,  
And sometimes years run fast,  
And when the Christ had put away  
Small, earthly things at last

And died upon a wooden cross  
One afternoon in spring  
Did Mary find the little toy,  
And sit . . . remembering? <sup>1</sup>

If Mary sat remembering, then, at this last word from the cross a wave of *tenderness* must have engulfed her almost more than she could bear. For it was she who gave this word to Jesus: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

This last word is first of all a familiar Old Testament scripture. Today we teach our children bedtime prayers: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep." In Jesus' day a good mother would teach her children certain psalms appropriate for little ones to learn. For example, Ps. 31 has lines that were used as a bedtime prayer: "into thine hand I commit my spirit" Mary would have taught these words to Jesus back in the days when she heard his nighttime prayers. And when she heard these words from the cross a wave of *tenderness* must surely have engulfed her!

Katherine Marshall's book *A Man Called Peter* is the story of her preacher-husband. She tells of his first heart attack when he was pastor of a church and chaplain of the United States' Senate. But, driven by his work, he would not take warning. Then it happened. He was stricken again in the middle of the night. They took

<sup>1</sup> Helen Welshimer in *Christ and the Fine Arts*, published by Harper & Brothers.

him to the hospital. His wife had to stay home for a time to make arrangements for their little son. When she arrived at the hospital Peter Marshall was dead. Only forty-seven years old.

For months Katherine Marshall lived with an ache in her heart until, one lonely day, she suddenly remembered. It was that night. She could see it all clearly. Her husband on a stretcher ready to be taken to the ambulance. He looked at her, managed a smile. His words now came back: "See you, darling, see you in the morning." The eternal morning of God's promise? Katherine Marshall tells how, suddenly, a wave of *tenderness* engulfed her heart and took away the ache that had been more than she could bear.

*Tenderness.* The bedtime prayer of a little child. The new meaning of a husband's remembered words. When we live with the Seven Words and come to this last word is there a *tenderness* that engulfs us? This was his bedtime prayer as a little child. And does the new meaning from the cross take away the ache in our hearts? Jesus' words give a new meaning to death. The cross means that death at its worst can still be in the hands of God. The cross means that every night, and especially at that last night, we can commend ourselves to God with the simplicity and trust of little children.

Hubert Simpson was a British chaplain in Word War I. He tells how he once knelt beside a young soldier who had been wounded and was at the point of death. "Beyond human help or hearing," the surgeon had just said. And so, as a sort of benediction prayer, the chaplain began:

Now I lay me down to sleep.  
I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake . . .

Suddenly, before Simpson could continue, in a last moment of strength, the soldier opened his eyes and finished:

I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." From infant days this had been a word of Jesus' flesh. And yet Jesus gave himself at

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the last into the hands of God with this same childhood prayer. This last word belongs to both his childhood and his cross. Perhaps it was the depths of this word that made Jesus one time say, "Except ye . . . become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

### *Scripture for meditation*

Luke 2:41-52: "All these sayings in her heart."

## FOURTH WEEK

■ Those who live with the seven words will find them speaking things this book never mentions. The words interpret themselves for each person. And the interpretations change as our personal need changes. They deepen as our inner life with Christ deepens. They come alive as our hearts respond to the Holy Spirit.

The experience of living with the seven words cannot, of course, be given out of this or any other book. But that experience can find us while we are reading such pages as these. It does come to those who will receive it. And when it comes the Holy Spirit will guide the application, the *interpretation*. (John 16:13.)

Have the words spoken to you? How much more they say than at first we had ears to hear!

The meditations this fourth week suggest a kind of personal interpretation. This entire book of readings merely suggests! No interpretation dare claim to be final. But it is my hope that each page will represent a testimony both to the centrality of Christ's cross and to his saving power.

### WHICH IS, BEING INTERPRETED

—Mark 15:34

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### THE FIRST WORD

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

W. E. Sangster tells about a husband whose young and lovely wife was killed by a drunken driver. There were two children, a boy and a girl. Naturally the husband was broken in sorrow. Everyone understood. But when the shock had passed and the edge of his grief had been blunted the husband still burned with a concentrated

hatred against his wife's "murderer." *Murderer*. Always (and not without justification!), he referred to the driver as "murderer."

That husband's home grew dark. Darker. He became sullen and shut-in. His children felt they had lost a father as well as their mother. And they had. There were ways in which he had died to them as much as their mother. Instead of a father there lived in his place a monster, brooding in twisted loyalty over his wife's memory. The children were in fear. And the husband maintained his hatred on the grounds (which no one dare deny!) that his resentment was *justified!*<sup>1</sup>

If Jesus had shown any resentment when they lifted him up on a cross we could only say that he would have been *justified*. But instead, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

You who read this page. What resentments are eating in *your* soul?

Chances are, you are *justified!* How else would you hold resentment and still be reading such a book as this unless you knew your resentments were justified? Even God himself, you may say, cannot deny your right to feel the way you do. But yet! Can you possibly have any more reason than Jesus our Lord when they lifted him up on the cross? Are the wounds in your heart worse than the wounds in his hands?

Look at your hands. There is no nail that has torn through your flesh. Your hands? Nothing compared to his! And your right to resentment is nothing compared to his! As different as his hands are from yours; so is his right to resentment different (more!) than yours. Jesus would have been justified *even if he had hated*. But no! Hear his prayer. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Ah! If only that husband could have forgiven the drunken driver, his wife's "murderer." Jesus forgave his murderers!

<sup>1</sup> *The Secret of Radiant Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 87. Used by permission.

#### WHICH IS, BEING INTERPRETED

If only that husband could have prayed for the man who made his children orphan. Jesus prayed for his enemies! Sometimes a first-forgiveness does not go far enough. But prayer is how a first-forgiveness goes the second mile. Jesus prayed forgiveness!

If only that husband could, at last, have made allowance for what had so tragically happened. Who can excuse drunkenness? But at least you can admit that the wife's death was not deliberate. Jesus saw that his crucifiers did not know! "Father . . . they know not what they do."

Are you considering? You who know you are justified in your resentment! Someone you love has been hurt. And now, it can never be put right again. Someone you love!

If only that husband who had so loved his wife could forgive! Would not forgiveness honor her more than his hate? Forgiveness, you see, is love. Jesus on the cross is the very love of God. "Father, forgive them." Are you considering? You who are *justified*! No one denies you have a right to feel as you do. But that so-called "right" will be your very death. Resentment does things to the soul more terrible than any auto accident can do to the body. *Father, forgive us; for we know not what we do!*

Are you considering?

But perhaps that is why you are reading this book. Perhaps you have come to the Seven Words, as we all must come, seeking his forgiveness. If so, this is the interpretation: nothing you can confess; no hatred or resentment of yours can possibly be any worse than what they did to Jesus on the cross. And yet he prayed for them!

And he prays for you.

Believe it! He prays for every single one of us. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

*Scripture for meditation*

Heb. 4:14-16, 7:22-28: "He ever liveth to make intercession."

## THE SECOND WORD

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

Have you ever heard it said this way: "Jee-zus Kee-rvst"?

Stop.

Decent people don't say it that way, not Christians! But how do you think they said it there at the cross? "They mocked him," says the scripture: Jee-zus Kee . . .

Stop! Respectable people don't say it that way. Do you hear it that way on the street? Maybe so. But with Christians it is different. Jesus is somebody important to us!

Has anyone ever asked you: "What's so important about him?"

And did you answer back and say, "He died for you, that's what!"

Important? Most people today take Jesus' importance for granted. But that day when he was crucified someone must have asked. Perhaps they pointed and said, "That one in the middle, the one they just nailed; did you hear what he said? And look. They have his name up. How come? What's so important about him?"

Jesus, the man in the middle, dying on a cross. What is so important about him? And for an answer the scripture carefully points out that the three crosses were significantly arranged. Consider. "And there were two other malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left." (Luke 23:33.) *Jesus was in the middle!*

Once there was a rich man, purple and fine linen. (See Luke 16: 19-20.) He ate sumptuously every day, so the story goes. There was also a certain beggar, sick and hungry. He would have been glad for crumbs from the rich man's table. It is Jesus who tells this story. Notice what he says. The beggar died and went to heaven. The rich man also died; "and," says Jesus, "was buried."



## WHICH IS, BEING INTERPRETED

What a masterpiece of understatement! "Died, and was buried"! You might almost think that was the end of the story. And there are some people who wish to God it were. But what we call "death" is not the end of anything except our earthly life.

And so, as Jesus tells the story, the rich man opened his eyes in torment and saw the beggar afar off. And the rich man cried to heaven: A drop of water! Let the beggar come, even if he only dips the tip of his finger to cool my tongue! However, in the story, this is the terrible answer: No one from heaven can come. We would if we could. And notice exactly how Jesus says it, his very words! "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."

A great gulf fixed between heaven and hell!

Did you see that gulf between the two thieves? Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them." One thief believed. The other continued to curse. And between them (see for yourself!) this great gulf "fixed." Fixed between life and death. Fixed between heaven and hell. This great gulf: the distance between the two thieves. And Jesus in the middle. Who knows what to say? This is eternal mystery. Why does one man still curse, and the other confess? Who can say? But there it is.

And Jesus, the one in the middle, what's so important about him? Just this: the prayer he prays, "Father, forgive." For one thief that prayer bridged the gulf from death to life eternal. It was the prayer of Jesus that saved the dying thief. Indeed, it is his prayer that saves us all. "Father, forgive." *Without* that prayer on Jesus' lips we would all of us be as far from God as heaven is from hell!

Has anyone ever asked you, "What's so important about Jesus?" Give them this answer: "He died for you!"

"Who, me?" they may say.

"Yes, you!"

This is the interpretation. None of us dare ever forget that the prayer of Christ on his cross is our bridge. It is the only bridge we Christians know that can take us from ourselves to God; from death

to life; from the man on the street to that strange man on the cross, dying there for us. "Lord, remember me. . . ."

"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me."

*Scripture for meditation*

Luke 16:19-31: "If one went unto them from the dead."

## THE THIRD WORD

*"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"*

The words catch your eye: "I'll be on my own at the controls, just like I've been alone always." It is a New York newspaper. You have just finished reading but had not noticed that little item on the back page. It takes only a moment more. A twenty-year-old mechanic's helper at Idlewild. He left a letter. It was addressed to a friend in the air force, Texas. The letter told how the young man had broken off with a girl friend. How he planned to take one of the Pan American planes. "They'll never be able to stop me, once I get on the runway."

Well, it happened just that way. The youngster got at the controls of a twin-engined DC-3. He sent it roaring across the runway. It failed to gain altitude. Crashed. And he was killed. It did not make the front page. Just a little news story in the back. And the item closed with these words from the young man's letter: "I'll be on my own at the controls, just like I've been alone always."

*Who* is at the controls in your life? Self? You alone? Or, as one famous flier reverently said, "God is my co-pilot." On my own at the controls? That is how some people live even if it leads to their own destruction. Selfishness is at the controls. "They'll never stop me!" *Me!* All some people think about is "me." The instant anything happens: "how will it affect me?" When there was talk of war the football coach said he hoped it wouldn't happen. Why? "Because,"

he said, "next season I've got the best squad of regulars coming up I've ever had. War would be terrible for me." *Me!* On the other hand, one man thought a little war might be "good for business." What he means is, "good for me in my business." God forgive us! People who think first of "me," always of "me," only of "me"! Forget about others. What about "me"?

When Jesus was in the Garden and the soldiers came: "Save me!" he said, hiding behind the disciples. *Not at all!* Jesus said, "If ye seek me, let these (my disciples) go." (John 18:8.) Save me? No! *Take me*, says Jesus, offering himself in order to save his disciples.

Later, when Peter was in the High Priest's palace he tried to hide himself in the crowd. "You are one of his," someone said. Peter denied it. Peter, you see, was thinking of himself and his own safety. "What about me?" But even as Peter spoke the cock crowed. "And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter." (Luke 22:61.) Jesus, you see, was thinking: "What about Peter?"

At last, when the blood drips and the cross sways up and Jesus hangs there, now at last does he think of himself? Listen. "Father, forgive them." Ah, you say, he is not really thinking of others now. It's just "them." A blind cry: himself and "them." Look again. There is a thief beside him. And Jesus has promised to remember. *Will you remember me*, asks the thief. How carefully Jesus speaks. He makes his words go out like great strong arms. "Verily I say unto thee, Today . . ."

Can you bear it now, to look at Jesus on the cross? His eyes are searching through the crowd.

"Lord, what is it?"

"When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother!" We who think first of "me," always of "me," only of "me"! Consider Jesus. He thinks of *others!*

"I'll be on my own at the controls . . . they'll never stop me." *Me!* The pathetic self-centered way some of us live. We even boast about it. Self-made! But do you see what it means with "me" at the controls?

This is the interpretation: without God at the controls most of us think only of "me." With God, we think of others. Even on the cross Jesus thought of others. Jesus, you see, had God at the controls. Before ever he cried out for himself, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" he first thought of others. First, before himself, Jesus thinks of others. He commends his mother to John, "Woman, behold thy son!" He commends John to Mary, "Behold thy mother!"

*Scripture for meditation*

Luke 18:9-14: "Certain which trusted in themselves."

## THE FOURTH WORD

# 4

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

Were there any little children there at the cross?

All of us have seen it. There is a kind of cruelty that seems to enjoy the sight of suffering. A kind of revenge that knows no pity. When Jesus was put up on a cross there were those who paraded back and forth like visitors at the zoo. Were there any children?

"And they that passed by reviled (Jesus), wagging their heads . . . likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save." (Matt. 27: 39-42.) And then they laughed. The chief priests and scribes and elders. They are all carefully mentioned in the Bible. They laughed. The coarse, mocking, loud laughter of men who have no pity. And even as they laughed, this terrible "forsaken" cry of Jesus: "*Eloi, Eloi . . . My God, my God, why?*"

Were there any children there?

Down in front of the cross stands a little circle of those who mocked Jesus. *Eloi, Eloi?* For one embarrassed moment all was still. They were shocked into silence, shamed, stunned, *Eloi!* All at once, there in the circle, some clown has a brilliant idea. They all know

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what Jesus says. They hear him plain enough. But this clown cups his hand back of his ear and pretends he can't hear. "What's that you say?" He looks up at Christ. Then he turns to the others, grinning. (This is going to be good!) He flips a thumb at Christ: "I think he wants Elias!"

It was an unexpected switch. It caught them all off guard. They roared with laughter. What a clever play on words. The pun! Not *Eloi*—Elias! Not God *Eloi*, but Elias the prophet!

Was it really funny? No. Then why did they laugh?

Francis Thompson has a poem in which he tells about a man who tries to hide from God:

In the midst of tears I hid from Him  
And under running laughter.

That is what these men were doing there at the cross. They tried to hide their shame under running laughter. They tried to hush their guilty conscience by mocking at Jesus when he cried out for God. Under cover of a joke, a pun, they tried to hide.

Were there any children there?

Yes, there was one. For even while the others laughed, listen. *Eloi, Eloi?* "Some of them . . . when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias. And straightway one of them ran, and took up a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. The rest said, Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him." (Matt. 27:47-49.) *One of them ran.* While the others mocked there was one who ran to do an act of simple kindness. He gave Jesus to drink and no one interfered.

"Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." What does it mean to become as little children? It means to forget your grown-up conceit and, instead, do what you know in your heart is right. The simple kindly thing a child would do. "I thirst," said Jesus. And they were all laughing. But there was this soldier. A rough, crude man, yes. But in him the heart of a child. He ran and gave Jesus to drink. With all his hardness outside, *inside* he was like a little child. Jesus once said, "Whosoever

shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name . . . shall not lose his reward." (Mark 9:41.) This soldier gave to Jesus himself.

Today everywhere you turn there is a terrible running laughter. Not the clean and kindly happiness of children. Instead there is the coarse and mocking laughter, the suggestive switch, the smut that people call entertainment. There is a laughter today under which men try to hide from God. The same today as it was long ago at the cross. And above the laughter this word of Jesus, "Eloi?"

The interpretation is this. When we hear the word of Jesus and our hearts run, in response, to do some act of kindness we belong to Christ. We are the little children of his kingdom. But when we stand and do nothing, when under running laughter we mock at kindness, we crucify Christ. Listen. "Eloi, Eloi?"

Are there any little children?

*Scripture for meditation*

Jas. 2:14-20: "Things which are needful to the body."

## THE FIFTH WORD

*"I thirst."*

"Kilmer, Joyce (1886-1918) American poet; b. New Brunswick, N. J.; killed in action World War I"—*Masterpieces of Religious Verse*—two lines in the index. That is all. 1886-1919. That would be thirty-two years old, almost thirty-three.

How old was Jesus when he died?

In France there are wayside crucifixes. Soldiers on the march would pass these lonely reminders of Christ and his cross. Was it a crucifix Kilmer saw? No one knows. But one day somewhere in France he wrote: "My shoulders ache beneath my pack." And then underneath, in parenthesis, he wrote: (*Lie easier, Cross, upon His back!*) The lines continue:

WHICH IS, BEING INTERPRETED

I march with feet that burn and smart.

*(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart)*

Men shout at me who may not speak.

*(They scourged Thy back, and smote Thy cheek)*

I may not lift a hand to clear

My eyes of salty drops that sear.

*(Then, shall my fickle soul forget*

*Thy agony of bloody sweat?)*

My rifle hand is stiff and numb.

*(From Thy pierced palm red rivers run)*

Jesus said (his only word of suffering!), "I thirst."

Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me

Than all the hosts of land and sea,

So let me render back again

This millioneth of Thy gifts. Amen <sup>1</sup>

Joyce Kilmer, thirty-two years old, killed in action. Was it a way-side crucifix? Some lonely reminder of Christ and his cross? No one knows. But beyond question here was a soldier with his shoulders aching, his feet burning, shouted at like some dumb animal, with sweat in his eyes and his fingers stiff and numb. These are things such as we suppose every soldier knows! But what does this soldier think about? *The cross and the Christ!*

What do we think about?

Do we remember to think of Christ? And have you ever considered that that is perhaps the one thing Jesus wants? For us to remember to think of him! What was his last request? Jesus asked us to think of him whenever we take bread and break it. (I Cor. 11:23-26.) He asked us to think of him every time we take a cup and drink.

We take bread every day when we eat. Do we think how he said, "this is my body broken for thee"?

Every day at table we put a cup to our lips. Do we think how he said, "my blood shed for thee"?

<sup>1</sup> From the book *Poems, Essays and Letters* by Joyce Kilmer. Copyright 1918 by George H. Doran Company. Reprinted by permission.

## LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

*Are we only supposed to think of Christ when we take bread and wine at Holy Communion?*

Today when you break bread, and with the cup at your lips, will you remember? Peter forgot. It was that same night, before the cock crowed. They accused Peter of being one of Jesus' disciples and he said, "Man, I know not what thou sayest. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked at Peter. And Peter *remembered* . . ." (Luke 22:60, 61).

That is how most of us remember. When it is too late. If only in our times of temptation we would remember to think of Christ before it is too late. Would Peter have denied Christ if he had first remembered instead of after when the cock crowed?

The interpretation is this: we will not deny Christ, as we sometimes do, if first we remember. Surely we cannot think of the suffering he bore for us and *then* add to his pain by our actions!

Before it is too late, will you remember? And remembering, will you then believe he did it all *for you*?

*"Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me."*

Surely we can do this for him. We can remember to think of his cross. We can live day by day remembering the words he spoke from it.

*Scripture for meditation*

Phil. 4:5-9: "Think on these things."

## THE SIXTH WORD

*"It is finished."*

Phillips Brooks has written about the judgment day. People used to take judgment for granted. They imagined God the almighty would sit on a throne, high and lifted up. They imagined every soul would come to stand alone for judgment. The recording



angel would read the record. Then the voice of the Lord would declare each soul's doom or blessing. Yes, says Brooks, that picture is about right except for one important difference. Phillips Brooks says that when judgment comes God will not speak. Instead, when we stand alone before him God will simply lift his hand. And immediately there will fall off from our souls all the outside reasons why you and I act the way we do. And we will stand there just as we really are *inside*.

And then, says Brooks, this man who has been good because he was afraid to be bad, this man who was good because he thought it was good for business, this other who wanted to be seen and praised—will all go in one direction. And this man, good because he loved the Lord, will go God's way. And so they will come, says Brooks, to the place of judgment.

That passage can stay with you strongly. God simply lifts his hand. And there falls away from our souls everything except what we really are inside. In a sense, this sixth word from the cross is the hand of God's judgment. All that Jesus has ever done now stands before God. *Done*. The word "finished" means *done*. Not "done in!" The cross is not Jesus pathetically coming to his end: "Now I am done for." Instead, the cross is that last obedience by which Jesus completes what God has given him to do. Now it is done. One word, "finished!" It was almost as if God in heaven raised his hand and there fell away from the life of Jesus all that was merely "outward."

Consider the outward things of Jesus. The stable where he was born; the carpenter shop where he sweat for a living; the supper table where they called him winebibber and glutton; that woman who wiped his feet with her hair; the garden where they took him as they would a common thief; the welts on his back where they beat him; and the public shame, the nakedness of his death! All this is how the outward life of Jesus looked. And now! God in his heaven! God raises his hand and all this "outward" falls away. Now the life of Christ stands clear. The "inward" life of Jesus, the *finished* work of God.

That stable? you say. The carpenter's sweat? *Now* look at his

poverty: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3).

Winebibber? you say. Glutton? *Now* look at his cravings: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."

That woman with her unbound hair? Did you dare to even think it? *Now* look at his soul: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."

*Now do you understand that the beatitudes are the "inward" life of Christ? And by his life we all are judged?* "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 2:5.) Some day when our life is "finished" God will raise his hand. All that is outward in us will fall away. And then, the judgment will be whether or not this *inward life of Christ* stands clear in us.

We hold this Christian faith. We believe that by one single life, lived here on earth, God rules the world. We read that life outwardly in the gospels. God reads that life inwardly in our hearts. That life outwardly and inwardly perfect, complete, "finished" is what Jesus on the cross presented before God. And by that life we all are saved.

And the interpretation is this. God will raise his hand. All that is outward will fall away. Then, unless Christ's life in us still remains we perish. For it is his inward life that redeems what is outward in us. His life is our true life. This is what Paul understands about the cross and judgment. Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20.)

#### *Scripture for meditation*

I Cor. 13: "And have not charity [i.e., Christ], I am nothing."

# THE SEVENTH WORD

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

Luke's gospel gives us this last word from the cross. But John's gospel tells us what Jesus did. John says that Jesus "bowed his head, and gave up the ghost" (John 19:30).

*Bowed his head.* Once you understand, it will grow upon you more and more. John's word "bowed" is the very same word Jesus used when he said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where *to lay his head*" (Luke 9:58).

*To lay his head!*

For Jesus, no place on earth was home. There was no pillow he could call his own. He had no where to lay his head until . . . Until! Now do you understand? Here on the cross Jesus *laid* ("he bowed") *his head*. Only the cross was his own. Here and here alone "he bowed" *he laid his head*.

He borrowed a bed to lay his head.  
He borrowed the bread when the crowd he fed.  
He borrowed the ass in the mountain pass.  
He borrowed a room on the way to the tomb.  
. . . they borrowed a cave, for him a grave.<sup>1</sup>

Borrowed! Foxes have holes. Birds have nests. But Jesus? No where. No where to lay his head until here on the cross! The cross was his own. The cross was his pillow. And with this last word, Jesus was at home: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

It was at the seashore. The youngster had been playing at the water's edge. Suddenly she was gone. They began to look. To call. All in a moment it was desperate. A week before a three-year-old had stumbled into the water. No one was watching. For days they had hunted. Then, they knew. Now, this child. People were trying

<sup>1</sup> Author unknown.

not to panic. At last a lifeguard, leading a frightened youngster. Tears!

The mother said absolutely nothing. She sat down in the sand and took the child in her arms. The little girl clung, with great convulsive sobs gradually subsiding. And then in the quietness, still no word spoken, the child laid down her head and the mother wiped away the tears.

On the cross Jesus laid ("he bowed") his head: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Now let us consider ourselves. Let us learn how to die. Let us understand simply and plainly, as a child understands a mother's comfort. Jesus Christ is how we die. And he is how we live. His death is not an end to life. His death is only a giving of himself, a "going home" to God. The cross is not the death of Christ. The cross is how he conquered death. Jesus said, "Because I live, ye shall live also." (John 14:19.) Christ is our life. To believe on him means to live. To believe in him means we are like that little girl in her mother's arms: *safe!* Do you realize what we are saying? To be "saved" means to be "safe" with God.

The interpretation is this: Jesus our Lord is what it means to be "safe" with God. His cross is our only salvation. Why? How? Because God raised Christ on Easter Day! The sobs of Calvary subside. The tears are wiped away. Each year, at Good Friday, we turn from his cross hushed and silent at what we see. But somehow, at this last word his peace is upon us. He said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27.) And because he was not afraid we are not to fear. He laid his head upon the cross and gave himself to God. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

He was not afraid. He is the reason why we will not fear. For he is with us. Like the rod and staff of the twenty-third psalm, his cross comforts us. Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil; for he is with us. And he is not afraid.

### *Scripture for meditation*

Dan. 3:16-25: "Our God . . . is able to deliver us."

## FIFTH WEEK

■ There was a man at the seaside, a maniac. Jesus gave him back his right mind. The man wanted to go with Jesus as a disciple. But Jesus said, "Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee." (Mark 5:19.) One can imagine that man wading out at the water's edge, watching Jesus' ship sail away across the sea. He does not turn his eyes away until Jesus is out of sight. Then, at last: "Now I must hurry home and tell what happened."

### THE OLD, OLD STORY

Men have been telling ever since. These days of Lent we have been telling ourselves about the seven words. His words can give us back our right minds. They lead us to see the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Always it is the same story. But each man tells it his own way. This week let us hear *in stories* the old, old story of what the seven words can do:

I love to tell the story.  
It did so much for me;  
And that is just the reason  
I tell it now to thee.

---

### THE FIRST WORD

*"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

Soren Kierkegaard tells the story. He calls it *A Parable of the End of Time*. He imagines a great theater crowded with eager people. Just at curtain time fire breaks out in the rear of the building. In order to avoid panic the manager sends the star of the show, a

popular idol, to make an announcement. "This is an emergency," the actor says, "and as a precaution you are asked to leave the building in quiet, orderly fashion."

But the show hasn't even begun. The audience is puzzled and uncertain. Some one claps. At that, they all take their cue. They think it is a publicity stunt. A round of applause comes up to the stage. The actor is genuinely alarmed. "There is a chance of fire," he says, pointing to the exits. "Safety requires an immediate clearing of the theater."

The people take it as they do that old gag: "is there a doctor in the house?" They wait for the punch line. And then, at the emergency in the actor's voice, they give him another round of applause for his acting. But he, with his face working, holds up both hands dramatically. He drops to his knees. "While there is still time!" he pleads. The people are delighted at what they think is the artistry of his make-believe. The actor's impassioned voice is drowned out by a roar of applause. Indeed, the applause almost drowns out an ominous rumbling. The floor shakes. Fire has been racing overhead. All at once, before anyone can move, the walls and roof collapse.

Fire! But the people were so accustomed to the actor's acting they did not take what he said seriously. Yes! says Kierkegaard in his parable. People are so accustomed to the preachers' preaching they do not take what the Bible says seriously. For example, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

How seriously do we take this first word from the cross?

We have been living with the seven words day by day this Lent. We have known them all our lives. Is it possible that we no longer seriously regard what the Words say just because they are so familiar? Has the man in the pulpit on Good Friday now become a play actor? Are preachers supposed to dramatize the seven words in order to call forth our tears and emotions? God forbid! God forbid if ever we take the seven words for anything less than what they say. Father, forgive us; for we know not what we do!

There was a nurse who came to her pastor. "Can you get me a little cross," she asked, "one that I can put in the pocket of my

## THE OLD, OLD STORY

uniform? There are times when I am tempted to blow my top." (Not a very elegant expression, but we all know what she meant!) "If only," said the nurse, "I could slip my hand into the pocket of my uniform and feel the cross!"

The pastor had an idea. There was an old oak pew down in the church basement, stored away for the wood. He took the oak of that old pew and made little rough crosses, only an inch. One Sunday at communion he gave a cross to each person in his congregation. "Put it in your pocket," he said. "Carry it with you. Perhaps there will be times when it will help you to think of Christ."

Would it help you, today, to think of Christ? Would it help to think how he said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"? You may not have a cross in your pocket, but do you have his word in your heart?

How seriously do you take it?

Kierkegaard's parable-story comes uncomfortably close. We approve forgiveness. We applaud it. We are impressed at this first word of Jesus from his cross. But there is an ominous rumbling that almost drowns out what he says. Hate is racing overhead. It is the old, old story. Fire, flood, or hate? What difference does it make? Unless we take this word of Jesus seriously, the whole of life will collapse. And suddenly. And great will be the fall of it.

*Scripture for meditation*

Matt. 7:24-29: (Do we take it seriously?)

## THE SECOND WORD

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

Charles Gilbert tells the story. He imagines how the Palm Sunday procession of Jesus stirred up so much criticism, complaint, and dangerous talk that Jesus knew his life was no longer safe. In order

to protect himself, he went to the Jewish authorities. He made a public statement that he did not claim to be the Messiah. And in the story, Gilbert imagines Jesus promising there will be no more scenes like Palm Sunday.

Meanwhile, the Palm Sunday gossip about a new king of the Jews somehow came to the ears of Pilate. He called in the authorities and demanded an explanation. They said to Pilate, "This man Jesus is only a teacher. He has already apologized and promised there will be no more parades or demonstrations." Pilate accepted the explanation. But he had his own grim way of warning that there must not be any more talk about a "new" king of the Jews. Then and there, that very same day, just before the Passover when Jerusalem was crowded with people; Roman soldiers conducted an execution. Two notorious thieves were put to death.

Now there was nothing unusual about an execution as such. Criminals were generally put to death on huge crosses. It was a terrible way to die. Men sometimes hung for days, despite the most awful suffering. And always, at Jerusalem, the executions were held on a hill called *Calvary* just outside the city. There everybody could plainly see what happens when you disobey Roman law.

However, because of all this talk about a "new" Jewish king, at this particular execution Pilate had an empty cross set up between the two thieves. On the empty cross pilate had a sign: Reserved for the King of the Jews.

In his story, Gilbert imagines Jesus and the disciples going out to see that sign. It was the middle of the day. The sun was hot. Flies were buzzing around the broken legs of the two thieves. It almost broke Jesus' heart to see the suffering. He walked up close in order to read the sign on the empty cross: Reserved for the King of the Jews. And in the story Jesus turns to a disciple named John: "I had a narrow escape," he says, "didn't I? I could have been on that cross myself!"

"Yes, mister," says John.

*Mister?* There is more. But that one word "mister" is the surprise shock on which the whole story hangs. Is Jesus "mister" or *Master?*

For an answer consider this second word from the cross. When



## THE OLD, OLD STORY

Jesus was crucified there were two thieves. One called him "mister." One called him "*Master*." One died cursing. The other died forgiven. It makes a difference when you die whether you call Jesus "mister" or *Master*. "Lord! remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

There is a poem that begins:

I had walked life's path with an easy tread,  
Had followed where comfort and pleasures led;  
And then one day in a quiet place  
I met . . .

Which is it? I met the "mister"? I met the *Master* face to face! How wrong and impossible it sounds when we even try to call Jesus "mister"! Take the hymns, for example:

O "mister," let me walk with Thee  
In lowly paths of service free . . .

No! It will never do!

O Lord and *Master* of us all,  
Whate'er our name or sign;  
We own Thy sway, we hear Thy call,  
We test our lives by Thine.

Jesus is the *Master*! He did not try to save himself. He did not apologize and promise to keep out of trouble. The cross was not an empty threat. Instead, the cross was the supreme price Jesus actually paid so that all eternity might know he is the *Master*!

It is the old, old story. The cross divides all men. There are some who see it as only another of life's tragedies. Poor "mister" Jesus! But we see it as the coronation of heaven's king. Jesus! *Master*! "Lord! remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

And I faltered, and fell at his feet that day,  
While all my castles melted away—

Melted and vanished, and in their place  
I saw naught else but my *Master's* face.

*Scripture for meditation*

John 13:13-17: "Call me Master and Lord."

## THE THIRD WORD

***"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"***

Henrietta Buckmaster tells the story. It is from her book *And Walk in Love*,<sup>1</sup> a novel based on the life of the apostle Paul. In her story there is a page where the word "little" comes to life. She imagines Paul in Antioch. At that time certain Jews, loyal to king Herod, bitterly hated Paul and all followers of Jesus. To the herodians Jesus was no Messiah. He was a crucified criminal.

One night these followers of Herod waited in the streets. It was dark. Without warning they attacked Paul and his friends. Clubs, then a dagger! Angry cries for Herod, against Jesus! The night watch came running. Their whips cut into the confusion. Paul's face was laid open. He wrestled with a soldier. "We were attacked," says Paul, "don't hit us!"

But the soldier shoved Paul sprawling. "Little Herods," he said, "little Christs! What do we care? You all make trouble." *Little Herods!* The soldier spat it out with contempt. It was as if a policeman today should call a gang of bullies "little Hitlers"! And what about *Little Christs?*

If you go to the dictionary and look up the name *Christian* you will find a definition something like this: "A follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. The name was first given in Antioch, about A.D. 43, and apparently by foes rather than friends. See Acts 11:26." Then

<sup>1</sup> *And Walk in Love* (New York: Random House), p. 162.

go to the Bible and check the verse. "The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." Christians. *Little Christs!* In Antioch they spat it out with scorn. Is that how our name Christian was born?

In her novel Henrietta Buckmaster imagines that there in the Antioch street Paul struggles to his feet. He thinks to himself: little Christs? That is what we are! Christ is in the heart of every believing one of us. I live, he thinks, yet not I but Christ lives in me. *Christ in us!*

Today, spiritually, none of us can boast himself to be as big as Christ. And yet. This is our Christian faith, however we may say it: Christ in us! So then. If we are not "big" Christs, it must be we are "little" Christs. *Christians!* There is a youngster six feet tall. They call him "little John." You see, he is named after his father. Can you imagine the pride and affection it means for that father to hear his son called "little John"? And is Jesus our Lord proud to have us called "little Christs"? Christians?

Remember, in the upper room when Judas went out to betray Jesus? The door closed. Judas was gone. Even the love of Christ could not hold him. It must have been heartbreaking. At the table Jesus turns to his disciples: "Little children" (John 13:33-34). On his lips how much that word "little" means! "Love one another," says Jesus, "as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples." *Little* children; little Christs?

"Woman, behold thy son!" There from the cross, with infinite tenderness, Jesus tells Mary that John must now take his place as her son. Then turning to John: "thy mother!" Now Mary belongs to John as if she were his own mother. "And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." (John 19:27.) One day, when John was old, can you imagine someone saying: Wasn't it asking a lot of you to have to take care of Mary the rest of her days? Oh no! says John. Compared to what Jesus did for me that was very *little*, the very least I could do!

It is the old, old story. We Christians are those who do for others in the name of Christ. But the very most we can do is such a *little*. Such a very little! And yet Jesus says, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least . . . yet have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:40.)

Little Christs? Yes, to the very *least!* But then Jesus himself said that to be least in his kingdom is more than to be most even among the prophets. (Matt. 11:11.) It is the old, old story. When we lose ourselves with Christ, we find ourselves with God!

*Scripture for meditation*

Luke 9:23-26: "Whosoever will lose his life."

## THE <sup>1</sup>FOURTH WORD 4

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

Admiral Richard E. Byrd tells the story. It goes back to 1933 when he spent the long polar night all alone in a little hut specially designed for scientific observation and recording.

For four months it was unbroken night. Once, Byrd left his hut to take a brisk walk in the open. He did not think "how far." Suddenly he remembered. He turned and found to his horror he had gone too far. Absolutely nothing of his hut was visible. Instantly, the danger! His own footsteps were already covered with snow. Overhead, clouds cut down what little visibility the stars might give. The polar night with its piercing cold shut him in. Now, at the slightest mistake in direction he would miss the hut and stumble on aimlessly to die. No human being can ever be more terribly lost than Byrd was at that moment. It is the measure of the man that he did not panic.

He had a long stave, a sort of walking stick. He drove it into the ice. "Here is my center. I can always come back to this," he thought. "The hut isn't far. If I keep this center in sight I can try out different directions until I see the hut." He started. Not for an instant did he lose sight of that "center." Once, and back. Twice, and back. Three times; and then, fear! Perhaps, in the dark, he could not go

far enough to be able to see the hut. He went as far as he could, but he dared not lose sight of his center. Then, there was a rift in the clouds; the stars came through; the overcast lifted. Under the clearing sky he could go a little farther and still see. In this way, holding to his center, he found the hut and safety.

Long ago Jesus took the cross and fixed it as our "center." Somewhere "out there" (and not too far!) *God is!* If we get back to him all is well. But away from him there is nothing but unending darkness. And is it too fanciful to imagine calendar pages falling silently like snow? Does life sometimes seem like a wasteland of drifting, blowing years? Have we already gone too far? *Turn! Look to the cross!* It is our only hope when the feeling of "lostness" comes. And it does come. Everyone knows some moment when he finds himself standing alone. The years have gathered like drifted snow. Frightened, we know it is only a question of time until we are literally buried.

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

He has not forsaken us. We have forsaken him. He has not gone from us. We have gone from him. Some of us have wandered far. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." (Isa. 53:6.) Once we are separated from God, how far can we go and still come back? How far? And as far as any human soul can ever go, Jesus went with his cross. Jesus went all the way out into our lostness. Yet he himself was not lost!

Jesus was not lost? Then what does this terrible "forsaken" cry mean? It means he went all the way out into *our* lostness. He himself was not lost. Doubt everything else, but be sure of this: Jesus was not separated from God even on the cross. "God was in Christ," says the scripture, "reconciling the world unto himself." This "forsaken" cry of Jesus was for us. It was for us he went all the way out into the darkness. The cross is God-in-Christ coming into our darkness.

In the Antarctic, when he was lost, Admiral Byrd found his way because he had a fixed "center." He held to that. It was the one sure point from which he found his way back to life and safety. Just so, the cross is our fixed center. It marks our faith that Jesus

went all the way to bring us back to God. His "forsaken" cry calls out our lostness, not his! "He was wounded for our transgressions . . . bruised for our iniquities . . . the chastisement of our peace was upon him." (Isa. 53:5.)

There comes a moment when children playing at burglars, suddenly hush. Was it a real burglar in the hall? We who have been playing at religion; this is our hush. Was it *really* God who suffered on the cross for us? Yes. It was really God-in-Jesus-Christ who suffered for us. It was God-in-our-darkness who made sure by his cross that whosoever believeth should not perish but have everlasting life.

*Scripture for meditation*

Matt. 18:11-14: "To save that which was lost."

## THE FIFTH WORD

*"I thirst."*

It is a child's story. The youngster came and knocked at a door and said to the man who answered, "I hear you have some puppies for sale."

"Yes indeed," said the man. "Would you like to see them?"

"I would like to buy one, if it doesn't cost too much."

"Well, son, they are ten dollars."

You could see the disappointment on the youngster's face. "I only have one dollar and sixty-three cents, but could I look at them anyhow?"

The man whistled. The mother dog trotted out with five little balls of fur rolling along behind her. The boy caught his breath. Then, anxiously:

"I heard there was one with a bad leg."

"Yes," said the man, "I am afraid she is hopelessly lame."

## THE OLD, OLD STORY

"That is the one I want," said the boy. "Couldn't I pay for her a little at a time?"

"But wouldn't you rather have one that can play with you? That puppy will never walk right."

And for an answer the boy pulled up his pants leg, showed an iron brace. "I don't walk so good either," he said matter-of-factly. "I reckon that puppy will need some understanding till she gets used to her bad leg. I did!"

The suffering in our world needs some understanding. Does God know? Does he understand when we suffer? And this word from the cross is our answer. For every tongue thick with pain, for every fevered lip, Jesus cries, "I thirst." "Wounded for our transgressions . . . with his stripes we are healed." Our sin and stripes and pain! He understands. He suffered it all for us. The hymn sings both our prayer and our faith:

We may not know, we cannot tell,  
What pains he had to bear;  
But we believe it was for us  
He hung and suffered there.

Yes! It was Jesus whose lips were parched: "I thirst." But it was for us. He understands our suffering. And in our suffering we need his understanding.

Now. Is all the suffering of the cross to be passed off with a nice little story about children and puppies? God forbid. This horror of his pain! Turn the faces of children away. But can you look at it yourself?

Do you know how the conscience of Germany was finally "turned" to look and see what happened in the gas chambers and the prison camps: Belsen, Auschwitz, Dachau? It was the diary of a little girl, Anne Frank. The world finally saw, through her eyes, what it was like to be a Jew. Cremated! Soap from human fat! Through her eyes the world saw naked Hungarian children waiting their turn twelve hours in the rain outside the gas chambers.

## LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

One who survived says, "she wept when most of us had no tears left." Does God know about all this? Ah, now do you see what it means? God sees the sorrows of every age through the eyes of Jesus Christ. We need such understanding! That is why Jesus suffered. The cross means God understands. And he knows we need his understanding.

Among all the hymns of Christ's passion the simplest is perhaps the finest. It was written for children to teach them the meaning of the cross:

There is a green hill far away,  
Without a city wall,  
Where the dear Lord was crucified,  
Who died to save us all.

But how could it be *for us*? Many ways. It is the old, old story. We can say to children that it is through the eyes of Christ God sees and understands our suffering. Children will know that the cry "I thirst" means God understands. And children will know that we need God's understanding. Children will know. Do we?

### *Scripture for meditation*

Mark 10:13-16: "The kingdom of God as a little child."

## THE SIXTH WORD

*"It is finished."*

Stenburg himself must first have told the story. It happened in Dusseldorf. Someone came to Father Hugo, pastor of the Church of St. Jerome. The offer was to give a memorial for the church sanctuary. After much deliberation it was decided that a painting, as a background for the altar itself, would be the finest gift. The artist



## THE OLD, OLD STORY

Stenburg was commissioned. His only instructions were: "the central figure is to be Christ on the cross. You need spare no expense."

Stenburg decided this would be his masterpiece. This would establish his name. He blocked out on canvass, in heroic proportions, the awful suffering of the crucifixion. He worked without interruption all through the winter. Every day was devoted to that one commission. But with the spring there came a restlessness. Perhaps it was the intense concentration. But somehow, as the picture took form, it tantalized and irritated the artist. At last, in desperation, he turned from his work. He walked out into the open country seeking relief, relaxation.

It was that spring day Stenburg discovered the gypsy girl. She was of pronounced, striking beauty. He saw in her an unusual portrait study. For a gold piece she agreed to pose. The artist in Stenburg worked with sure skill. But his tormented spirit, restless with the winter's work, found no relief in this new canvass. In fact, the gypsy girl seemed to increase his irritation. For, from the very first moment she entered the studio, her eyes were always on that unfinished picture of the cross intended for the church.

It was evident she had never heard the real story of the crucifixion. Impatiently, the artist answered her careful questions. His annoyance did not discourage her asking. Day by day the picture took possession of her. The meaning of Christ's saving love gave her a new radiance. But it was her final word that struck home. When she took her last long look before leaving the studio, she said, "You must love him very much, Signor, when he has done all that for you. Do you not?"

When Stenburg went back to painting the altar piece he could not forget. That question of the gypsy girl became an obsession. It hammered in his brain. It beat with his pulse. At last he could no longer deny it. All winter he had been using Jesus simply as a "subject" for his painting. Now that very Jesus, risen and alive, was knocking at his heart in the words of the gypsy girl: "You must love him very much, Signor, when he has done all that for you."

Suddenly Stenburg knew. This picture could never be his masterpiece. Its message was Christ suffering. The message ought to be

Christ's great love! Immediately he began a new painting. It was almost as if God's fingers traced with his. This new painting he would not sell. He gave it to his native city, Dusseldorf. It hung in the public hall where all could come, rich and poor alike. And under the painting the artist placed an inscription: "All this I did for thee, what hast thou done for me?"

Do you understand what happened to Stenburg? He saw what we need to see. He saw that the suffering of the cross is "finished," but the love of the cross goes on! Jesus said, "It is finished." The suffering? Yes. The pain ended that day of his cross long ago. But the love of his cross still conquers. It is this triumph of love Jesus cries out. The struggle is ended and love has forever won. *It is finished!*

The old, old story keeps repeating itself. One day a young nobleman, Count Zinzendorf, stood before Stenburg's painting. He was transfixed. He could not turn away. That painting changed his life. Or rather, the message of the painting. Zinzendorf gave his wealth and position to the cause of Christ. He became the founder of the Moravian Church. And the Moravians profoundly influenced John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. It was just as the artist wrote it: "All this I did for thee, what hast thou done for me?"

The painting itself was one day tragically destroyed by fire. But the message of the cross can never be destroyed. It has forever conquered. Jesus said, "It is finished!" All this he did for us.

What have we done for him?

*Scripture for meditation*

I John 3:16-24: "He laid down his life for us."

## THE SEVENTH WORD

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

John Watson tells the story. It is in a book of stories from the Scottish Highlands *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* under the pen

name "Ian MacLaren." One of the chapters tells of a beloved old doctor who lived all alone. But at every cottage throughout the countryside he was considered one of the family. Always, no matter what the weather, he answered every call. Rich and poor, good and bad, he helped them all in the spirit of Christ the Great Physician.

Now at last, the good doctor himself lay sick. His strength was failing, his end almost come. At the bedside was his Bible:

"Read to me," he said.

"What shall we read?" they asked.

"Hold the Book," he answered, "it will open itself to the place where I have been reading every night."

Did Jesus have certain places in his Bible where he loved to read? And every night did the Bible in the heart of Jesus lay open at one certain psalm? The thirty-first? Especially at the fifth verse where it reads: "Into thine hand I commit my spirit"?

Consider! This last word from the cross is a verse from the Psalms. In Jesus' day the Psalms were used as hymns. The thirty-first psalm was an evening hymn for family worship. And in any devout Jewish home, long before little children could ever read they would be taught a bedtime prayer from the thirty-first psalm.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." All his life, from childhood on, Jesus knew this verse. Did he always use it as a prayer at night with which to close his eyes in sleep? The words are so simple and trustful a child can understand. Yet they are so far reaching and profound they gather all the suffering of the cross into a benediction.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Joseph Fort Newton tells how Rembrandt once put these last words from the cross into a painting.<sup>1</sup> "No one can live long enough to forget it," says Newton. He describes how, in the painting, at first you see only the cross. Light and shadow are magnificently arranged so as to dramatize the utter collapse of Christ. The hours of suffering have done their work. The loneliness of death catches at your throat. But as you look longer, more closely; and as your eyes get used to

<sup>1</sup> *His Cross and Ours* (New York: Harper & Bros.).

the dimness: then you see! Two swift, strong gentle hands support the figure of Jesus. The hands of God! They are mighty and merciful, holding the Christ in infinite tenderness. But! If you keep looking at the painting intently the whole scene will take on the shape of a great face. A face seamed with such sorrow and eyes deep with such sadness as only the face of God could ever know.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." This last word from the cross bids us look long, closely! There is darkness all about the cross. But in the darkness, the hands of God. There is shadow all about the cross. But in the shadow, the eyes of God keeping watch above his own. It is this last word from the cross Rembrandt has painted. It is this last word from the cross that lets the Bible in the heart of Jesus fall open so that we may read the prayer Jesus loved to pray.

It is the old, old story.

Tonight, in the darkness, is there a Bible at your bedside? Does it fall open for you as it did for the Scottish doctor?

"Hold the book," he said, "and it will fall open itself to the place where I have been reading every night."

Tonight in the darkness, in your heart, before you sleep: let Jesus hold the book. Let it fall open to the place he loved. He loved it so much he made it his last word upon the cross. And let the prayer he prayed be yours. Tonight and every night.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

### *Scripture for meditation*

Ps. 119:105-12; "Thy word is a lamp."

## SIXTH WEEK

■ "Search the scriptures," said Jesus, "for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." (John 5:39.) The scriptures also testify to the seven words. To their meaning, their importance, their interpretation! The basic faith of the seven words can be best illustrated in the lives and incidents that scripture records.

The book of Acts tells of certain who were "more noble" than some "in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). In the same sense there is a nobility of soul that comes from receiving the seven words with all readiness of mind. And when we search the scripture daily we find the seven words confirmed, exemplified, dramatized! This next week in Lent, therefore, let us set each word against some background of scripture as we would a precious stone against velvet. Let us see the meaning each word takes on in the contrast and color of scripture.

"Search the scriptures," said Jesus, "for in them ye think ye have eternal life." *Eternal Life!* That is the kind of life we seek and can find when we live day by day with the seven words.

# SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

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## THE <sup>1</sup>FIRST WORD

*"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."*

Sometimes forgiveness seems to be offered like a give-away prize. No questions to answer. No coupons to send in. Just say, "Jesus died

for me." That's all it takes! Crude, isn't it? Ignorant, too. And yet, our whole heart cries out that Jesus *did* die for us. Somehow, the cross *is* how we get our sins forgiven. Jesus *said*, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Do you remember the woman who was caught in the very act? Adultery. They brought her before Jesus in the temple. Why before Jesus? Because she was bait. Bait set for a trap. What a master-stroke of contempt it was! To make Jesus the laughingstock of coarse and common gossip! Men would tell their jokes. Women would whisper. Jesus once said, "whosoever looketh on a woman. . . ." (Matt. 5:28.) Well, this is one time he would have to look!

They jeered at Jesus. Master! Moses commanded that a woman like this should be stoned until dead. *What do you say?*

And do you remember what Jesus said? "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone." Then, in that crowded temple court there was a sudden awkward silence. A wave of color—crimson—swept over certain faces. A man turned. The crowd gave way to let him through. And then, another.

That great court of the temple must have been frighteningly still. "One by one," says the scripture, "beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more." (John 8:9-11.)

You see! Her sins were forgiven her. Easy, wasn't it? Or, *was it?*

Now let us put the crudeness aside. But let us be very plain and direct. Is there any one of us without sin today? Is anyone ready to take the first stone and cast it at another? These days of Lent, so near to Holy Week, something ought to be happening. The very same something that happened in the temple long ago. A sort of frightening stillness; a sort of holy terror ought to come upon us. When we consider the cross others ought to give way until, at last, each one of us stands alone before Christ as did that woman long ago.

Who can explain it? But in our hearts we know. We know the words of Jesus from the cross were spoken for each one of us alone. His words literally burn into our guilty souls. Is there anyone without sin today? Is there anyone ready to take the first stone and cast it at another? You. Whoever you are! Where are your accusers? What about your sin?

When Jesus spoke to the woman this is what he said: "Neither do I condemn thee." Why didn't he condemn her? Because in that terrible moment she had already condemned herself! She knew herself condemned.

And that is what always happens when we stand before the cross. A certain frightening stillness comes upon our souls. At the cross we discover we are alone. Alone before Christ. Why is it, at the cross, we condemn ourselves? How is it, at the cross, we know ourselves condemned? *And what happens?* Does Jesus condemn us? Listen. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Search the scripture! Scripture says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." (Rom. 8:1.)

No condemnation?

Can we be sure? Yes, the cross is our assurance. This first great word from the cross is the one chief reason why we dare to believe our sins are forgiven. Crude or no. The cross is how we get our sins forgiven.

*Scripture for meditation*

Matt. 7:1-5: "That ye be not judged."

## THE SECOND WORD

*"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."*

Did you know that this thief on the cross is the only person in the four gospels who ever dares call our Lord by his given name *Jesus*?

None of the disciples ever dared. What right has this thief to say, "Jesus, remember me"?

In the manuscripts out of which our English Bible is translated it actually reads: *Jesus*, remember me. One thief railed: "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us." But the other answered in rebuke, "Dost thou not fear God? We receive the due reward of our deeds, but this man hath done nothing amiss." And then, turning to Christ: "*Jesus*, remember me." No one else in any gospel is ever quoted as daring to address our Lord directly by the name *Jesus*. Only this thief. The likes of him! What gives him the right to use the name *Jesus*?

Somewhere along the centuries devout scholars must have been shocked at this verse where a common thief is so free as to call our Lord by his personal name. And so they took this verse and softened it. Just a shade of change. Instead of "*Jesus*, remember me" they made it read: "Lord, remember me."

There now! That sounds better. A bit incorrect, perhaps, but much more respectful

And so, all our lives we have been reading: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." However, when today's scholars were preparing the recent Revised Standard Version they took this verse and put it back the way it is supposed to be. Check for yourself. The thief really says, "*Jesus*, remember me" (Luke 23: 42, R.S.V.).

Now, let us ask the question. How does a man, any man, ever get on close enough terms to call Christ by his given name? Will going to church do it? Can you draw close to Christ by bowing yourself in some great cathedral? Will the music of choirs; the reverence of incense; the humbling yourself at an altar: will such things bring you close to Christ? Will they give you the right to address him directly?

Try it and see. Your great cathedral will be like a huge echo chamber: hollow, empty, mocking. It will throw back at you the name you have no right to utter. Music? Prayer? Incense? Such things in themselves will never give you the name *Jesus*.



## SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

Well then, perhaps science will bring you close to Christ. Is not God the God of truth? Go to the laboratory. Think God's thoughts after him. Let the marvelous mind of man open the secrets of creation. Who knows? Maybe, by science, we can come close enough to God to call him by his personal name. But wait. Ask yourself what happens when any conceited little human tries to stand up with God. *Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return!*

There is an old commandment: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." And yet here we are, like that thief on the cross! We take the name of Jesus. What right have we?

Search the scriptures. Before ever Christ was born the angel said, "Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Today, we are his people. We are the people who can only be saved from our sins by the cross of Christ. Was it not the cross when Christ gave the thief the right to call upon that name? "*Jesus, remember me.*" Search the scripture! The cross is still today the only right we have to take the name *Jesus*. Today, we believe there is "none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). No other name, only his!

Long ago Jesus said, "Today shalt thou be with me." And it is so. Both here on earth and there in heaven. The faith that calls upon the name JESUS is the faith that has him with us day by day. To live with the Seven Words means to live with him, with his name on your lips and branded in your actions.

### *Scripture for meditation*

Acts 19:1-7: "Baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

## THE THIRD WORD

*"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"*

Edwin Poteat suggests that when Mary left the cross John wanted her to start out at once for Galilee. But Mary insisted they go first to

Bethlehem. And so, that same day of the cross, in the dark of night they knocked at the door of the inn at Bethlehem. An old man answered, holding a lantern. He saw what they wanted. Without a word being spoken, he shook his head. No room.

Of course! It was passover time. No one could expect to find room at an inn so close to Jerusalem. But Mary did not hesitate. She put her lips to the old man's ear. "The stable?" she asked. The old man's eyes opened in sudden amazement. He lifted his lantern to look carefully in Mary's face. "God of Abraham," he said, "the stable!" And so, Mary spent the night where her hand could reach out and touch the manger. That night of the cross Mary sang an old remembered song. "My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden." (Luke 1:46-48.)

Only a suggestion. Yet, in a sense, it must be so. That night of the cross Mary must have gone back in her heart to Bethlehem. All her life she had pondered the mystery of Jesus. Even as a boy he had said to her in the temple: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49.) And when Jesus became a man; that day of the wedding in Cana of Galilee Mary would never forget his words: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come" (John 2:4). And again. When the crowds were flocking around Jesus his enemies were also there. Mary was afraid. She begged Jesus to leave off this preaching and come home with her. But Jesus said, "Who is my mother . . . Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my . . . mother." (Mark 3:33, 35.)

Such words are too much for remembering. And too much for forgetting! That night of the cross Mary must surely have remembered. Ever since the angels sang at Bethlehem Jesus had always been a stranger to those private claims of love that mothers cherish. Jesus had always belonged to God more than to her. And now Jesus was gone. Now Jesus himself had joined Mary together with John as mother and son: "Woman, behold thy son!"

Why did Jesus give Mary to John? Obviously of course, because she needed a son to care for her. But perhaps it was also because John himself needed a mother *just to care!*

## SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

In the days before the cross, when people were talking about Jesus as a possible king, it was John's mother, Salome, who came to Jesus. "Grant that these my two sons," she said, "may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left, in thy kingdom." (Matt. 20: 21.) Salome was one of those who push and strive and climb to put their children on top. Notice. She does not say, "James and John." She says, "*my* two sons." There is a kind of mother to whom you can only tell things that will please or make her proud. No doubt Salome was a good woman. But yet! Had John missed the understanding a mother can give? Did John need a mother *just to care?*

Search the scriptures. Jesus himself was bound to the will of God with an obedience that did not flinch even at the cross. All his life Jesus was consecrated to whatever God would have him do. But Jesus was not blind. He knew the something Mary had missed. He also knew the something John still needed. And with an infinite tenderness and understanding, even in the pain of his cross, Jesus gave Mary to the care and love of John. He gave John to the love and care of Mary. And ever since the cross we Christians have known that a home is not just a place to live. It is a place to love and care.

In any family, when each one takes the other in the name of Jesus that is what makes a home. Jesus says: Husband, behold thy wife! Wife, behold thy husband! Children, behold your parents! Or, as Jesus said it on the cross, "Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"

### *Scripture for meditation*

Eph. 5:21-6:9: "Submitting yourselves one to another."

## THE FOURTH WORD

# 4

*"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*

The parable we call the "prodigal son" is the heart of what it means to be saved. And this "forsaken" cry from the cross is the heart of what it means to be crucified. Let us put the two together.

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons." One stayed home. The other went out into the world and made a fool of himself. Dissipated, disgraced, his inheritance gone, the prodigal was reduced to feeding swine. "He would fain have filled his belly," says Jesus, "with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish." (Luke 15:17.) *Perish!* How far "down" can a man go? A son in a wealthy house; a self-willed young man sowing his wild oats; a penniless stranger sobered by hunger; a swineherd who would eat pig swill if he could! How far "down" must Jesus go before the word *perish* begins to take hold?

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish." *And I perish*, said the prodigal. What hope is there for such a man? What hope is there for "saving" the typical "skid-row" bum? What hope? Only this parable *and* the cross of Christ!

In the parable, when the prodigal was yet a great way off his father saw him and had compassion *and ran!* Imagine that father running. The heavy running of an older man; his face all the while working with the anguish of compassion; his eyes filled with prayers; the pain in his chest that is more than shortness of breath. Mark this! Jesus does not say the prodigal ran. He says the father ran.

Nothing else could have done it, only this. When he saw his father running it broke the prodigal's heart. His pat little speech, all rehearsed, never got said. The words stuck in his throat. They choked in his tears. It used to be he would run to his father. Now, his father was running to him!



Do you not see it? *The cross is God running to meet us!*

It was when he saw his father running. That is when, all at once, the prodigal saw what he had done to his father. Saw how his father had loved him, prayed for him, waited. Saw that all his father wanted was "him." Even the way he was, filthy from the pigs! All at once the prodigal saw the son he should have been and now could never be.

*But that is not the story!*

It is not that the father let the prodigal come home. *The story is* that the father made the prodigal a "son" again. And what kind of father is this? *This is God!* Jesus said, "When ye pray, say, Our Father." On the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, into thy hands." He prayed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Do you not understand? This fourth word is Jesus *praying* to God his Father. The prayer is taken from the Psalms. And the psalm is a prayer of absolute trust in God no matter what.<sup>1</sup> Search the scriptures. Read the twenty-second psalm and see!

A missionary from Africa tells how he once asked a primitive convert how he felt toward God. The native said, "I hate God." The startled missionary discovered the native had somehow formed the mistaken idea that God hates us. The native thought God wanted to destroy us.

"I hate God," said the native, "but I love Jesus!"

"Why?"

"Because Jesus saves us from God."

At least that is how it seemed to an ignorant savage. Do you think the cross is Jesus saving us from God? Or do you see that the cross is Jesus reconciling us to God? Do you see that *Jesus is God* saving us from ourselves, from our sin, from death! Do you see that the whole of Christian faith turns on one verse in the Bible: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."

Where did that African native get the wild idea God hates and Jesus loves? Where do we get the idea God and Jesus are in any way separated on the cross? Is it this word "forsaken"? Search the scrip-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. devotion for Good Friday p. 118.

tures! (See Ps. 22:24.) *God did not* hide his face from Christ. Instead, as the scripture says, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself . . . (God) made him to be sin for us." (II Cor. 5: 19, 21.) God himself came to meet us in our sin. Like that father running! The cross is how God came *all* the way to meet us; to take us as we are despite our sin and make us his own. God makes us his children. Let there be no mistake about this. God so loved the world.

If so, then what does this word "forsaken" mean? It means eternal mystery. The mystery of God's love *and* our sin. Our Father *and* ourselves. This word is Christ, God-in-Christ, crying out what it is like for him to be made "sin" that we might be made "sons."

But we dare not end until we say that in the parable of the prodigal there was also an elder brother. "He was angry," says Jesus. He said to the father: This son of yours is no brother of mine. Look at all the years I've worked. What have you ever given me?

Do you see what Jesus' parable says? It says we can neither *earn* God's love by being good, nor can we *destroy* it by being bad. Love is something God alone can give. We can only receive it. And the wonder of the cross is that God "so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

### *Scripture for meditation*

Luke 15:11-32: "My son was dead, and is alive."

## THE FIFTH WORD

*"I thirst."*

Let us bring him in and stand him before us. The man in the soldiers' barracks who got a laugh when he dressed Jesus up like a king! In any rough crowd there is always some clown who tries to

be the life of the party. And here he is. The man who made the crown of thorns and shoved it down over top of Jesus' eyes. They all laughed.

Horseplay never knows when to stop. This is the man who put a blindfold over Jesus' eyes, spun him around, fetched him a clout on the side of the head: "Prophesy! Who smote thee?" It was all so funny! You could hear guffaws all over the place. This is the man who laughed the loudest. Funny? Fit to kill. Thought he would die laughing.

That terrible laughter! Even on the cross they mocked Jesus.

Here he is before us, right now, this soldier. The buffoon who thought it would be funny to make Jesus a mock king. How do you think he feels now? Here, in the uncomfortable silence, with the centuries staring at him. We do not think it was funny. What does he think now?

Did they all laugh, there in the soldiers' barracks? Some did. What a joke! The "king" of the Jews. They pushed Jesus from one to the other. Every shove brought a new wave of merriment. And here is the man who capped it all. He stepped up to Jesus. Got the attention of everybody. "Here's what I think of the king of the Jews!" he said.

And then he spit.

No one wiped Jesus' face.

Search the scriptures. The soldier who thought it was all so funny. This is the man the Bible means: "And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head." (Matt. 27:29, 30.)

And Jesus? Jesus never said a word. He was brought "as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." (Isa. 53:7.) Ridicule, weariness, excruciating pain when the scourge whip cut into his flesh: the indescribable agony of the cross! Search the scripture. There is not a single word from Jesus about himself until now. And even now he only says, "I thirst."

Not everybody thought it was funny. When Jesus cried his thirst the Bible says one of the soldiers ran. He filled a sponge with his own ration of sour wine, put it on a spear, lifted it up to Jesus' lips. And Jesus received it. One of the *soldiers*, mind you! They did not all think it was funny. For example, the centurion in charge. He saw it out to the end, this suffering of Jesus. Remember? He said, "Truly this man was the Son of God." (Mark 15:39.)

What would set a soldier's feet to running when Jesus cries in thirst? What would make a Roman officer regard Jesus as the Son of God? In the rough and ready of army life these men had seen many an execution. Some soldiers were so calloused they could jest at death, make it a joke. That is what they were doing when they put the crown of thorns on Jesus' brow. But these soldiers had never seen suffering taken as Jesus took it. Not so much that he clenched his teeth and bore it bravely. Others had done that. But strangely, Jesus suffered the cross as *something God wanted him to do*, something he was willing to do for God! And only when it was done; only then did Jesus speak any word to show the pain he bore. Even then all he said was, "I thirst."

Who was this soldier who ran, filled a sponge, put it on a spear, lifted it up to Jesus? Could it possibly be? Is it any way conceivable that it was the *same soldier* who tormented Jesus with the crown of thorns, smote him, spit upon him? Could this be the man who ran and gave his own ration of wine for Jesus to drink?

*Is it possible for the cross of Christ to make a change like that in any man?*

And some of us today who have been searching the scriptures (and letting them search us!) are ready to confess. Yes! The cross has made a change like that in our own lives. Living with the seven words has changed us. The cross has opened our eyes to things we never saw before:

See, from His head, His hands, His feet  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down:  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?



*Scripture for meditation*

Ps. 22:7, 8; 19-26: "They that see me laugh me to scorn."

## THE SIXTH WORD

*"It is finished."*

While we are gathered at the cross, shadowed by this dreadful thing that has happened to Jesus, let us pause for a moment of recollection. Calvary is outside the *north* wall of ancient Jerusalem. And when Jesus staggered on his way to Calvary bearing the cross; another man, all alone, set his face in the opposite direction. He went *south* through the city, out through the Zion gate, hurried his way down through the valley of Hinnom. All the way down that rocky slope he could see the smoke rising from the city rubbish heap. "Gehenna" it was called, the place from which we today get our idea of hell as a torment of burning.

Jesus was on his cross. This man had not waited to see. But he knew what was happening. (Is it more terrible to imagine than it is to actually see? Who can tell!) And this man was breathing hard. Was it the effort of climbing his way up across the valley? Or was his desperate breathing due to some inward agitation?

Watch what he does. From about his waist he unwinds the long girdle-sash men wore in those days. From the folds of the sash he takes out a money bag. He opens the string. He counts the coins that are left. Each piece of money slips through his fingers like a rosary of regret. The man seems to be remembering. Suddenly he starts up. Quickly he knots the sash. It must have been a rocky edge. For when Judas hangs himself there was, evidently, a desperate violent leap. His neck snapped. The tree breaks. And falling, the body of Judas was split open.

Far away, on the other side of the city, on another kind of tree; Jesus was hanging on the cross. And Jesus says, "It is finished." Did

Jesus think of Judas? Was the loss of Judas some of the darkness that came down on Calvary?

Search the scriptures. There were two trees that day. The tree where Judas died stood in a field that men began to call "the field of blood" (Acts 1:19). Was it the blood of Judas or the blood of Jesus? So often we forget. It was the same afternoon when Jesus died that Judas died. There were two trees in the diary of that terrible day.

What marks the treachery of Judas? Some say the thirty pieces of silver. Others, the kiss. "Judas, betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48.) *Why does Judas first pretend affection and then betray Christ?* And when some Judas of today talks about religion, *why does he so often start out with a word of praise?* "Yes," he says, "Jesus has inspired a lot of good in the world, but . . ." But! Then begins the slur, the secret stab, and the twist. It was Judas who set the old, old pattern. First you flatter. Then you do the traitor's work.

But what has Judas to do with us? Or with this word from the cross? Just this. We today offer Christ our affection. We praise him. We magnify the cross. But what if all our tribute be nothing but an empty kiss! Remember Judas? "It is finished," said Jesus. And for Judas it was finished. Finished with a terrible finality.

And now, remembering Judas, we are humble. We dare not trust ourselves to praise this Jesus. What is our love for him? It is his love for us that counts! His love. Even for Judas. If only Judas had come back to Christ even he could have found forgiveness. Love forgives. That is why we come to Christ today. In him we see the finished work, the whole purpose, the complete forgiveness of God's love. Jesus says, "It is finished." And the echo of Judas's last wild cry sounds in our ears. We draw nearer to the cross. May God save us from ever dying as Judas did. May God keep us to this cross where death is finished and life begins. The cross has its sorrow, yes. But it has a glory. It has a triumph. It has the power of God in it. And when Jesus says, "It is finished," we know it is death that is finished. His word is a word of victory. This is the cry of a Christ who triumphs.

## SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

Search the scriptures. How strange to think that the same afternoon Jesus died, Judas died. Two trees. But only one for us. The tree of Calvary. The words of his cross.

### *Scripture for meditation*

Luke 22:47-53: "And drew near unto Jesus to kiss him."

## THE SEVENTH WORD

*"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."*

There is a special church service for use on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of Holy Week. The ritual goes so far back into history no one can trace it. It is called *Tenebrae*, i.e., the coming of darkness. A huge cross is set with candles and put up in the church. When the people come they find the candles all burning. There is no other light. The service is very simple. It is taken from scripture. There is no sermon. Instead, beginning with the last supper, the preacher reads the gospel record. One by one the abuses and betrayals Jesus suffered are recounted. And at each separate shameful indignity a candle is put out.

How many candles in such a cross?

It would take three hours to properly read all that was done to Jesus. But once, in a one hour service, there were twenty-four candles. And each year it was the same dramatic experience. There would be a blaze of light at the beginning. The church bright with the many candles of the cross. Then, an hour of absolute quiet. Nothing but the reading of scripture. First, the story of Judas in the upper room. The reading comes to the place where Jesus says, "that thou doest, do quickly." Then the scripture tells how Judas, "having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night" (John 13:30). The reading stops. Deliberately in the silence a candle is snuffed out. Judas is gone.

One by one the candles are extinguished. There comes the accursed moment when Peter denies his Lord. It is that moment when the scripture says, "And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter" (Luke 22:61). The reading stops. Again in the silence another candle goes out. It is an eerie feeling. The Bible reading goes on. Slowly from the corners of the church the darkness seems to creep in. The shadows close about the cross until, at last, there is only one flickering light. It is *Tenebrae*, the coming of darkness.

That one candle is this last word of Jesus from the cross. This is the word where Luke tells about the darkness that came down on Calvary. (Luke 23:44, 45.) But no darkness can put out this light. Not even death can take away what Jesus now gives to God: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

There was another darkness once in the daytime. A storm raced its hurricane path up along the Atlantic coast. All day long the wind blew and the streets were whipped with rain. But suddenly, at the supper hour, it was over. People came out of their houses and gathered along the beach, drawn by a sort of instinct. Overhead the clouds were still heavy with darkness. But out at the horizon there was a break in the sky and a brilliant sun shining through. And far out at sea where the waves were still racing in, there it was: the rainbow shining in the light.

When Jesus was crucified do you suppose that somewhere over Calvary there was a break in the darkness? And a rainbow? The gospel does not say. But the gospel does say that after Calvary there was an Easter morn! And ever since we Christians have been sure that in spite of any darkness we can trust the love of God.

In the church service called *Tenebrae* there is one candle that is not snuffed out. It is this last word of Jesus on the cross. This candle burns through the entire service. And yet the service is called "the coming of darkness." Why? It ought to be called the coming *through* darkness! There is one light on the cross that shines *through*. When the darkness comes it can come only so far and no further. It can only come as far as death. But beyond death there is a life that comes through, Jesus on the cross! "In him was life," says the gospel, "and

## SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

the life was the *light* of men. And the light shineth in darkness."  
(John 1:4, 5.)

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;  
Shine *through* the gloom and point me to the skies;  
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

The cross is the light of life in the darkness of death. This is our faith! We can put it in a single sentence and a word of prayer. Not our prayer, but his. Jesus prayed, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." *Yea, though I walk through* the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me! Search the scriptures. They testify.

*Scripture for meditation*

John 1:1-14: "The light shineth in darkness."

# HOLY WEEK

■ When Luke comes to the close of Good Friday he makes this meaningful statement: "And that day was the preparation" (Luke 23:54). Luke means that the day after Good Friday was the Passover. Friday, therefore, was what the Jews called "the preparation."

However, in a new and tremendous sense Good Friday is also what we Christians call "the preparation." In the sacrificial language of faith we see Jesus as the lamb of God "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). It is *God's* preparation that we see coming to climax on Good Friday. And following Good Friday, as sunrise follows night, Easter draws on.

*The preparation!* When Easter dawned, "very early in the morning, they came to the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared" (Luke 24:1). *Our* preparation is also a part of the Easter story. But how needless were the spices they had prepared so long ago. And how unexpected was the Easter when God blessed what they had so lovingly done.

Just so, how inadequate all our preparation has been these days of Lent. But still, in his own unexpected way, God will bless what we have lovingly done. Easter will come and our hearts will understand once again. Calvary is preparation. Easter is fulfillment.

## THE PREPARATION

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### WEDNESDAY—THE PREPARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Listen. Do you hear the splash of water? The devil is pouring into a basin and people everywhere are washing their hands!

Remember when Jesus was sentenced to die? Pilate publicly

washed his hands before the world: "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" (Matt. 27:24). And the story is that sometime in the darkness of that first Good Friday night the basin disappeared. That basin Pilate used when he washed his hands of Christ! Nobody will say who took it. Judas Iscariot stole it to sell? Plainly a lie. Judas was at least honest enough to go and hang himself. ]

[Some years ago Lloyd C. Douglas wrote a famous novel *The Robe*. It is the make-believe story of what happened to that robe they took from Jesus at the cross. Later, Thomas Costain gave us *The Silver Chalice*. Again, the make-believe story of what happened to that communion cup Jesus used the night of his last supper.

But what about this basin? This washbowl in Pilate's palace? ]  
✓ Would you believe that every year on Good Friday this *same* basin is everywhere around us? Even in our churches. Listen! Do you hear the splash of water? The devil is pouring into a basin. And people are washing their hands. People are saying to themselves: "Isn't it terrible, what they did to Jesus!"

What they did? Who?

Why, those who crucified Jesus. *They!*

Can it possibly be? After all these years are people still saying *they* crucified Jesus? Do you not realize *we did it*? Each one of us! Will you confess it? Not theoretically as a sort of theological idea. But actually as a matter of offense to almighty God. He was wounded for our transgressions. We did it. Christ was crucified by people like us. No. Not by people *like* us. It *was* us. Each one of us. We crucified Christ.

Does anybody say to himself: "Preacher's talk! Sure, some way or other everybody is guilty before God. But . . ."

*But what?* Listen! Do you hear the splash of water pouring into a basin? People are everywhere washing their hands. Even in churches. People saying to themselves: "Isn't it terrible, what *they* did!"

This is not the time to argue.. Either you know what it means or you don't. The scripture says, "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him." (Luke 23:33.) *They!* That includes us, each one of us. By our sins we put

him on the tree. Even today, two thousand years after, we are still part of what they did. And when Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them for *they* know not what they do," he means us. Each one of us.

Does Jesus mean Pilate too? Ah! That is the question. Pilate had washed his hands of Christ. Pilate had no fault to find in Jesus. Let others do what *they* want. All Pilate wants is to be let alone. (And that is all many people want today. "Don't force your religion on me!" they say. "Go to church if *you* want to. But let me be. This Jesus of yours has no part in me.")

How many times have you said to Jesus: "Let me alone. I know I'm not the Christian I ought to be. But, after all, I'm as good as most and better than some?"

How many times have we deliberately tried to wash our hands of what it means to be *really* Christian: ("I go to church. I pay. Isn't that enough? What else am I supposed to do? Be a missionary or something?")

Listen! What do you hear? The splash of water? Or do you hear Jesus saying, "they know not what they do." *They?* Who else but us does Jesus mean when he prays his prayer for our *preparation?*

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

### *Scripture for meditation*

Matt. 27:15-25: "His blood be on us, and on our children."

## THURSDAY—PEOPLE WHO PREPARE CROSSES

We are the people who prepare crosses.

The men who "arranged" Jesus' crucifixion were religious leaders. *Pharisees* they were called. They knew the scripture as the "law" of God. They earnestly sought to apply it to their own lives. Such men are the moral backbone of a congregation. They set the standards for others to follow. Jesus was the independent who did not



speak and teach and practice their way. Therefore, the religious leaders believed they would do God a service by getting rid of him. And they called Jesus *heretic*.

We are the people who prepare crosses.

The men who "demanded" Jesus' crucifixion were successful, church-going businessmen. *Saducees* they were called. They had the temple concessions. They were not pious like the Pharisees, but they were church supporters. Such men pay the bills. That is why they enjoy the privileges of God's House. Jesus was the fanatic. He drove out the money changers and the merchants. He accused them of making God's House a "den of thieves." Probably these men called Jesus *crackpot reformer*.

We are the people who prepare crosses.

The men who carried out the crucifixion were soldiers. No questions were asked. Orders are orders. For example, the beating of Jesus! It is a coarse, hard way of life. At first, it takes "getting used to." But in the end you can even throw dice at the foot of a cross. Any soldier knows "what goes." They look at the crowd. They look up at Jesus. And they say *poor scapegoat*.

We are the people who prepare crosses.

It was the crowd, the "public" who so casually consented to the death of Jesus. Imagine them. Getting up in the morning, rumors of a trial before Pilate, gossip of a holiday people: "An execution today? Those two thieves? And the prophet from Galilee also? Oh! They got him quickly, didn't they!" And so, the crowds who once heard Jesus gladly seemed unconcerned that he should die. No petition gotten up. No protest made. Everyone figured it was not his business to say anything. If you had asked the man on the street he would probably have said: Well, this Jesus was sort of a *sensationalist*.

Yes, we are the people who prepare crosses.

Those who prepare crosses all too often suffer on them. That was to have been the fate of Barabbas. All through that night before his deathday Barabbas could hear the soldiers come and go. He heard the gossip of some trouble in the city. By daylight there was

the growing murmur of a mob outside. An echo of voices. A sudden roar. "Give us Barabbas! Crucify him!" Barabbas expects the worst. Here come the steps of the jailor. The cell door opens. "Barabbas, you are free!"

Later, when it was all over, did Barabbas go out on the lonely hill and stand looking up at the empty cross: "Well, whoever you were, 'Jesus,' you were my *substitute!*"

We are the people who prepare crosses.

Everyone of us. Each in his or her own way. Whoever we are. Secretly or openly. By ignorance or deliberate evil. Everyone of us has had a hand in exactly the kind of thing that put Jesus on the cross long ago. And yet, like Barabbas, where *we* should be crucified: there is Jesus, lifted up, taking our place while we go free. Are we worth it? That Christ should be crucified and we go free?

Are we worth it? Perhaps this was the fourth and great temptation! Remember how in the wilderness Satan tempted Jesus to be popular by feeding the hungry? To "prove" himself by jumping from the temple? To get political power by compromise? Against these three temptations Jesus showed himself the master. But! There is a fanciful story of a fourth and great temptation. It is in the pages of a novel *The Chain* by Paul I. Wellman. When Jesus hung upon the cross, the story is, Satan returned. It is the moment of Jesus' greatest shame and despair. It is the moment when people like us crucified him. Even his own disciples had forsaken him and fled. That moment is when Satan is supposed to have whispered in the ear of the suffering saviour:

"They are not worth it, Lord!"

This fourth and great temptation! "They are not worth it." Then is when, so the story goes, Jesus raised his head and said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." We are the people who prepare crosses. But it is Christ who is crucified while we go free. All through history. For every man in his turn. For each one of us the cross is the Christian symbol of what Christ has done. He considers each one of us *worth it!*

*Scripture for meditation*

John 18:28-40: "Take ye him, and judge him."

**GOOD FRIDAY**

"And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, *Eloi, Eloi, lama Sabachthani?* which is, bring interpreted. . ."

—Mark 15:34

*To interpret*, says the dictionary, is to bring out the meaning or significance. But how shall we interpret this word: "My God, my God. . . ?"

Try saying it aloud. Do you not hesitate? Have you ever in your life been able to say those words aright? Are you satisfied you can make them sound as they did on the lips of Jesus? Will you scream them in pain as people do when they are injured? Or will you sob them in despair as helpless parents when a little child dies? Or will you shudder them in fear as a man might at that last breaking moment before he loses his mind?

Preachers who must speak these words in the Good Friday service ought to ask a special forgiveness. The man in the pulpit dare not sound as if he is play-acting the cross. It would be better if these words were read silently to ourselves when we pray. They go deeper than our ready-made explanations and theories. They go as deep as sin and forgiveness and God's eternal purpose.

*And yet everyone of us must try to hear these words in his or her own heart. Will you try now?*

First. In your imagination go out across the Pacific ocean. Set the clock of your heart back to Tarawa, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Korea. At any one of these places American soldiers, killed in action, are being laid to rest. And you are standing silent. You are thinking to yourself: *It is far from home to be laid away so!* Then the chaplain stirs. It seems as if some extra word ought to be said. He begins:

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth . . . a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Then he pauses. The chaplain need say no more. That one sentence takes you back to Gettysburg. *The chaplain need say no more!* Silently, in every American heart those stately words go on in an echo of grandeur:

"that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain."

There is no mistake! When the chaplain murmured that one opening sentence from the Gettysburg Address every American heart would understand he meant it all. Every word!

Now. Set the clock of your heart back at Calvary. Men have just been lifted up upon their crosses. You can hear their first shrieks. Two men writhing in their torture. And the strangely different word of one other who says, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." And we are standing silent. Each disciple is thinking to himself: *it is far from God to be lifted up so!* Then, Christ on the cross stirs.

"Master! What are *you* thinking in your heart?"

It seems as if some word must be said. And Christ begins: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Then he pauses. *Christ need say no more!* For in that one sentence every disciple's heart goes racing back to the twenty-second psalm and its triumphant faith. That one opening sentence brings to mind the whole psalm. *And Christ need say no more.* For in the heart of every disciple the stately words go on in an echo of grandeur:

Ye that fear the Lord, praise him; for he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him . . . your heart shall live forever. All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord . . . and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this!

—Ps. 22:23-27

*There is no mistake!* "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" is the opening sentence of a triumphal psalm. And when Christ spoke that one first sentence, he meant it all. Every Word!

Surely, in the awful hour of the cross, the disciples must have wondered if God had failed Jesus. They must have questioned in their hearts: will Christ now turn away from God? It was indeed the hour to scream in pain, to sob with despair, or to shudder in fear. If ever Jesus would turn from God it must be now! But no. Instead he speaks these words of the twenty-second psalm. And by that opening sentence Jesus declares the psalm's unquenchable faith. *Ye that fear the Lord, praise him! God hath not despised the affliction of the afflicted! Neither hath God hid his face from me!*

In the very same way, when God calls us to take the deep waters, we would turn to the twenty-third psalm and say: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." We can stop there. Everyone will know that our hearts go silently on to say, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

I did not know the meaning of the Cross.  
I counted it but bitterness and loss:  
Till in Thy gracious discipline of pain  
I found the loss I dreaded purest gain.  
And shall I cry, e'en on the darkest day,  
"Lord of all mercy, take my cross away"?  
Nay, in the Cross I saw Thine open face,  
And found therein the fulness of Thy grace.<sup>1</sup>

Forsaken? This Good Friday cry from the cross is Jesus' triumphant answer to hate and death and sin. *Triumphant!* We affirm it! For the scripture says he cried with a loud voice. A *loud* voice. *Triumph!*

### *Scripture for meditation*

Mark 15:24-39: "Truly . . . the Son of God."

<sup>1</sup> George Wallace Briggs.

## SATURDAY—PREPARED FOR DYING

Have you been introduced to yourself recently? No. Not the person you are now. Instead, the person you were twenty years ago! My, how you have changed. And no wonder! In twenty years you have lived through financial struggle, disappointed hopes, and frustrated ambitions. You are older now. At some time these past twenty years you have been sick. And someone you love has died.

If we were to meet ourselves in the street now as we were twenty years ago, it would almost require an introduction. But instead, let us turn away from the past. Let us look to the future. What do you suppose you will be like twenty years from now? No. Not twenty years. Let's be frank. What kind of person will you be *when you die*? What will be your last word and thought?

Do you want to know?

"Oh," you answer, "things are always changing. How can anyone tell about the future?"

Yes. Things do change. But some things remain the same. For example, Jesus' last word from the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." That prayer was the same for Jesus at his death as it was when he first learned it as a child.

Are you surprised that Jesus died with a prayer? Hardly. All his life Jesus prayed. The disciples could almost have predicted that their master's last word would be a prayer. They could remember when Jesus rose up a great while before day, and went out into a solitary place, and there prayed. (Mark 1:35.) Or when he chose them as disciples. First, says the scripture, he continued all night in prayer. (Luke 6:12.) Or that day when he broke bread for the multitude. Jesus prayed. (John 6:11.) And in the garden at Gethsemane: "O my Father. . ." (Matt. 26:39.) Prayer was the lifelong habit of Jesus. What else then, but that his last word should be a prayer!

Of course, things do change in life. Things certainly changed for Jesus. On Palm Sunday it was *Hosanna to the King*. Five days later, *Crucify him!* Jesus well knew the changes life can bring. Nevertheless, prayer always remained the same for him. Especially this last

prayer. All his life it had been the same: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

We have already said this last word from the cross was the first word of prayer Mary would have taught the baby Jesus.<sup>1</sup> We have even dared to suggest that each night of his life Jesus was in the habit of saying these words as a closing prayer.<sup>2</sup> But do you realize what this means? If all his life Jesus had been saying this childhood prayer, it means all his life Jesus had been *preparing*, learning how to die!

*Did anyone ever teach you how to die? Are you prepared? What will be your last words and thoughts? Do you want to know?*

Tonight is that strange night between Good Friday and Easter. Tonight, when the day is completely over and even your prayers are said; tonight, when your eyes are closed and you think your last thoughts before sleep; tonight say to God what Jesus said on the cross: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." You *can* choose your last thought before you sleep tonight, and every night. You *can* make your last sentence at night a lifelong habit of prayer. You *can* make this prayer you have learned at the cross a lesson that will last all your life.

Have you been introduced to yourself these weeks of Lent, here at the cross? No. Not the person you are. But the person *you can be* when you die. No matter what changes your future may bring, here is something that can stay the same. Here are words you can repeat after Jesus now, as once he said them over at his mother's knee. Here is prayer that can prepare you now for that last moment when you say with Christ: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

*Scripture for meditation*

I Pet. 3:10-22: "That he might bring us to God."

<sup>1</sup> Cf. p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. p. 93.

## EASTER SUNDAY—PREPARED FOR LIVING

Roger Shinn, professor of theology at Vanderbilt University, has a question. He asks it this way. Two men on a three-day fishing trip get to talking one evening:

"What's your wife doing tonight?"

"I don't know. She thought she might have a few friends in. Then again, she said she might go to the concert."

"Doesn't that bother you? Not knowing what she's doing?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Didn't seem to bother her! She enjoys an evening with friends, same as I do fishing! Matter of fact, if she can get the tickets, she said she'll phone your wife and ask her for the concert."

"That's nice of her, but my wife is busy. I know what she's doing every night I'm away."

"You do?"

"Sure! Last night she had a committee meeting for the woman's club. Tonight my mother is having her over for dinner. Tomorrow night she's going to write checks and pay bills. She doesn't know it, but Charlie Brown is going to phone and ask for me just to make sure she's home."

"What's the idea of all that?"

"Well, these women get lonely. You never know when they might step out. I don't believe in taking any chances."

"Hm-m. I guess I just don't worry about that."

"You mean you don't know where your wife was last night?"

"That's right."

"And tonight?"

"No."

"And tomorrow night?"

"Look, she's got a mind! She can decide for herself!"

"That's just the trouble. They do decide for themselves! How can you trust your wife if you don't know what she's up to?"



"Are you sure you trust yours?"

"You bet I do! I know where she is every night."

Roger Shinn says you don't have to be a psychiatrist to see which man does not trust his wife. One man has to check exactly what his wife is doing each night. He has to account for her every evening. Because he does not trust her he has to *know all the answers*. But the other man *knows his wife*. Without having to know all the answers in advance he trusts her.<sup>1</sup>

Do you trust God?

Or do you have to know all the answers about death before you can believe God raised Jesus Christ?

Do you trust God? Be careful. There is a catch in the question. There is a hook that can tear out your very insides. The catch is: how can you trust God unless you know him? That last night before the cross Jesus said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me." And Philip answered, "Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Now then. Here is where the hook took hold of Philip: "Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" (John 14: 6-9.)

Do you trust God?

Or do you have to know all the scientific answers before you can believe God raised Jesus from the dead? There are people who seem prepared to believe there is no truth to Easter unless they can prove the details of the resurrection. But often such people show by their very questions that they do not yet know (do not yet believe) the love of God. And how can love be "proved"? That was the point of Roger Shinn's story. If a man knows his wife, knows that he loves

<sup>1</sup> From *Life, Death and Destiny*, by Roger L. Shinn. Copyright 1957, by W. L. Jenkins. The Westminster Press. Used by permission.

her and she loves him; he can trust her, yes! And if a man knows God, knows that he loves God and that God loves him; he can trust God.

*If he knows!* But that is the hook. How can anybody know God? And for an answer Easter gives us Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ risen from the dead! Easter gives us Jesus Christ who himself trusted God even when he died on the cross. Easter means that if you trust God you do not have to know in advance all the details of life and death and grave and resurrection. And if you do not trust God the details will never convince you. It is as simple as that!

Do you trust God?

Consider Jesus. He faced death and the cross without fear because he knew God. There are some who say Jesus did not know all the answers. But would such people say Jesus did not know God? Our Christian faith is based on two beliefs: Jesus did know God *and* we can know Jesus.

Must we know all the scientific answers before we begin to believe Easter? Paul would be impatient at any such insistence. He would say, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12.) These niceties of argument and proof about life after death and resurrection! These careful demonstrations of the details. These accountings of the grave and empty tomb! These evidences are not Easter. They have their proper place, of course. But they are not Easter. Easter is one great question: *Do you know* the God and Father of Jesus Christ? *Do you know* whom you have believed?

There is an experience that comes from living with the New Testament day by day. In its pages you begin to know Jesus Christ. And when you live with his words you begin to know how complete was Jesus' trust in God. Indeed, you begin to know that on the cross God was in Christ reconciling the world *and us* to himself. And to know this is to believe Easter. To know this is to be prepared for both daily living and eternal life.

## LIVING WITH THE SEVEN WORDS

The scripture says it all in a sentence. "This is life eternal, that they may know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." (John 17:3.)

### *Scripture for meditation*

John 20: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

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